Youth(s), Truth(s), and Pierre Bourdieu: Taking Another (Closer) Look at At-Risk Youth Intervention Programs

by

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This thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation on at-risk youth intervention programs as a site of struggle for, resistance to, and negotiation of the cultural politics of youth. Thinking with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, particularly his concepts of *doxa* and *field*, I pose new questions that trouble youth as truth to suggest an alternate way of imagining youth as a struggle. A case study of one at-risk youth intervention program serves to make visible the ways in which historical and political narratives of youth(s) and truth(s) inform, pressure, constrain, shape at-risk youth intervention programs by implicitly defining and redefining the problem, prescribing the solution, recommending best practice, and works to draw connections between youth(s), truth(s), and social space.
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Chapter 1

This thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation on at-risk youth intervention programs as a site of struggle for, resistance to, and negotiation of the cultural politics of youth by exploring how at-risk youth intervention programs are conceived, justified, reproduced according to the perceptions and choices (conscious and especially otherwise) of social actors. Building on the existing foundation of critical sociological and youth studies literature that argues for youth as a relational concept, and thinking with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, particularly drawing on doxa, a concept about socially-constructed truths, and field, a concept to map the complicated life of social systems, I pose new questions that trouble youth as something naturalised, romanticised, problematised, and suggest an alternate way of imagining youth as a struggle. I re-situate at-risk youth intervention programs within the socio-political context from which they emerge to show how notions of youth determine how at-risk youth intervention programs look, work, feel—for/from a dominated social position. A case study documentary analysis of a particular at-risk youth intervention program serves to make visible the ways in which historical and political narratives efficiently inform, pressure, constrain, shape at-risk youth intervention programs by implicitly defining and redefining the problem, prescribing the solution, recommending best practice, and works to draw connections between youth(s), truth(s), and social space. Finally, I discuss the paradox of empowerment uncovered therein that challenges those critical theories that overemphasise power as domination rather than power as complicity, and I consider the possibilities and limitations of doxa and field as tools for rethinking at-risk youth intervention programs.
Although the practice of sorting, selecting, classifying young people according to measures of at-riskness or otherwise is not new—Lubeck and Garrett (1990) trace the origins of at-risk youth intervention programs back in time to at least early nineteenth century America—a new era of at-risk youth intervention programs emerged in Canada and the United States in the early 1990’s (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; te Riele, 2006; Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). Today, at-risk youth intervention programs have become have a common presence in educational, social service, and youth work initiatives, steadily expanding in frequency, scope, and influence. The practice is based firstly on the premise that it is possible to predict the likelihood of individual/social events, and subsequently, also the premise that there are ways to avoid the risk posed therein (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 321). A multitude of various programs for young people now operate regularly across Canada, based in homes, schools, communities, managed by public and private organisations, developed to prevent, resist, and/or remedy a wide range of issues, including academic underachievement, domestic conflict, violence, criminal involvement, substance abuse, and peer pressure. At-risk youth intervention programs are often funded by tax dollars, introduced and/or supported by government representatives, sought after by community leaders, welcomed by concerned parents and teachers, recommended by past participants, hailed as empowering and heroic. At-risk youth intervention programs can be a successful means of providing better access and greater opportunities (academic, career, personal) to some young people otherwise marginalised by educational and social support systems (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 321). Says one at-risk youth intervention program director: “We're in the business of empowering youth and providing skill development in areas that are critical for young people in order for them to grow up and
achieve their dreams and be the best they can be” (in Zummach, 2005). The goodwill and logic of this statement, also those like it, as expressed by non-profit representatives, recognised by government officials, appreciated by teachers, parents, young people, seems nothing short of admirable, let alone fraudulent or hurtful.

Around the same time, at-risk youth intervention programs also emerged as a popular topic of discussion amongst critical sociological and youth studies circles. Since then, these scholars have kept pace with the expansion of at-risk youth intervention programs, yet amassing a significant amount of literature arguing against such practice. There seems a consensus that at-risk youth intervention programs are generally/often indeed contradictory; that is, claiming young people’s empowerment as the objective, yet offering only ultimately normative practice by enforcing dominant ways of being and reproducing dominant ways of knowing (see Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). For many these reasons, the principles, purpose, and practice of at-risk youth intervention programs, are indeed highly problematic: at-risk youth intervention programs are compared to colonisation rituals (Jeffs & Smith, 1999, Youth subculture section, para. 4) and government and institutional control and surveillance mechanisms (Muncie, 2006); even as business enterprises for those who profit from youth organisations (“poverty pimps”) (see Cruikshank, 1996, p. 238), or else medical treatments designed to treat and “fix” (te Riele, 2006, p. 141) biological flaws (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331). Critics problematise the overrepresentation of minority identities in at-risk youth intervention programs (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001), criticising the construction and enforcement of an unrealistic, ideal-type citizen (Kelly, 2007). The literature portrays at-risk youth intervention programs as not only failing to
address those problems they are designed to resolve, but also fuelling the very systems that enable, maintain, reproduce those problems.

However, the implications such arguments have elsewhere is unsettling. Although I cannot argue against the evidence (above), nor deny the gravity of the claims put forth by them; it is my personal observation—as both a student of critical sociology and a veteran of youth programming—that the most frequently-cited rationale behind at-risk youth intervention programs is not power, nor financial gain, nor even the securement of a favourable public reputation, but—more rational than these and also less cynical—only the best intentions. This juxtaposition of my concurrent roles as contradictory, even antagonistic, my certainty that behind every at-risk youth intervention is a team of dedicated, caring, well-meaning adults, also the mere persistence of at-risk youth intervention programs as reliable strategies for youth empowerment amidst the masses of critical literature arguing against the practice (te Riele, 2006, p. 131) each/all warrant an investigation of this seeming dilemma.

**Locating the struggle**

The objective of my project, in the words of Bourdieu (1991), is “not to take sides... but to make the struggle itself the object of investigation” (cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 259). In fact, I suggest the struggle is something more or less than a conflict of interests; after all, the one (or two) things youth work advocates and critical youth studies scholars share in common is the belief that the best interests of young people are at stake—and that the stakes are high (Swartz, 1997, p. 125). Rather, Kelly describes youth studies and youth work as “a debate about the practices of intellectual knowledge production; practices whose motive forces
include not only diverse attempts to tell the truth about youth, but also tell the truths about the process of truth production about youth” (Kelly, 2000a, p. 308). Likewise, I locate the struggle for/against at-risk youth intervention programs somewhere between “the thinkable” and “the unthinkable” (Webb, Shirato & Danaher, 2002, p. 119), amid the relations of relations, having to do with, as Kelly (2000) describes, an elaborate “mobilization of truths” (p. 306).

This project is based on the premise that at-risk youth intervention programs are unthinkable without having first known at-risk youth, an idea which itself exists only in relation to youth (see Lesko, 2001, pp. 10-11). What does it mean for at-risk youth intervention programs that “The category of ‘youth at risk’ now enjoys a common sense status in the minds of many social scientists, policy makers, and practitioners” (Bessant, 2001, p. 31; emphasis added)? “The pervasiveness of the at-risk ideology and the certainty of what should be done discourages critical reflection,” responds Lubeck and Garrett (1990, p. 328). This is the gap in the literature this paper seeks to fill; that is, to borrow the words of Bourdieu himself, the “question-begging implied by the most trivial remarks of everyday existence pass unnoticed” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

Durkheim (1912) offers

Now logical life evidently presupposes that [sic] know, at least confusedly, that there is such a thing as truth, distinct from sensuous experiences… We generally talk as though it should have spontaneously presented itself to them from the moment they opened their eyes upon the world. However, there is nothing in immediate experience which could suggest it; everything even contradicts it (p. 94).
Elsewhere, he insists, beliefs “do not have to be ‘true’ to be ‘real’” (cited in Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 7); and further, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) notices how dominant discourses in fact depend on false clarity (in te Riele, 2006, p. 141). This “epistemological rupture,” as Hamel (1997) might describe it, and subsequent re-casting of truth, makes space to question the dis/interest therein, to consider new ways of knowing youth, the possibility that youth is indeed something social, cultural, political. I think about “the sociological imagination,” that which C. Wright Mills (1959) sees as “[enabling] us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognise this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst” (p. 349).

In this way, I interrogate common sense as more than simply “that plain feet-on-the-ground sense of reality” (Holton, 2000, p. 87); truth as more than any observation of reality; youth as more than a social category. “The theory of knowledge,” writes Bourdieu (1977), “is a dimension of political theory because the specifically symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality—in particular, social reality—is a major dimension of political power” (p. 165). Lisa Delpit insists, “We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs” (cited in Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 338).

Youth, I argue, is a sociological phenomenon always indirectly discussed but directly addressed not nearly enough, a question frequently tripped over yet rarely noticed, problematised somehow rarely questioned, something seemingly “generic” and “genetic” (Bourdieu, in Hamel, 1997, p. 107). Instead of accepting common sense understanding of youth, this thesis questions tacit assumptions of youth as truth, arguing for the concept of youth as a *cultural arbitrary*, a truth grounded not in logic nor fact, but instead constructed according to symbolic, historical, embodied, pre-reflective, tacit, collective agreement on
“the value and meanings of the existing social order” (in Webb et al., 2002, p.), manufactured through processes of knowledge production and meaning-making. I argue like Jeffs and Smith (1999) that notions of youth, as a population of bodies defined by assumptions of age, experience, qualities, and skills limit youth workers and sabotage youth work initiatives.

Resituating youth against the social context from which it emerges as an objective story surfaces the historical and political narratives underlying notions of youth, which in turn challenge the aforementioned critical youth studies research which evidently “overemphasise power as a source of domination” (Giroux, 1999, p. 16). Rather, such a model makes it possible to lay bare the way at-risk youth intervention programs seem to represent both the best intentions of youth advocates and oppressive forces of domination. Lubeck and Garrett (1990) propose

a language of action is needed to see how our meanings are dissimulated, contested, reconstructed, co-opted, incorporated, in short, how they are actively created through collective human effort. Perhaps most of all, we need to understand how our continuously re-constructed symbolic representations serve both to obscure and to maintain unequal social relations (p. 329).

This thesis suggests there are serious limitations to this overly-simplistic dichotomy of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ youth work practice. I see the blanket conviction of all youth workers as guilty of perpetuating destructive youth discourse as inaccurate, and the violent attack of all efforts to enrich the experience of young people as unfair. Further, I worry such judgment has the potential to chase away valuable resources from youth studies’ pursuit of greater social equality. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) advise
Clearly, highlighting the political significance of curricular choices must be done with care. Such dialogues may help to clarify what is at stake, but raising these issues can also lead to dysfunctional stalemates and may deepen differences rather than prompting more thoughtful inquiry. Yet not all discord is problematic—when the stakes are high, conflict is both likely and appropriate (p. 265).

With this in mind, I approach at-risk youth interventions programs with what Wyn and White (1997) refer to as “a third way to do youth studies;” one “informed by a sense of the complexities, opportunities and constraints pertaining to young people,” rather than the traditional, “overly empirical, problem setting version of youth studies,” as argued by advocates of at-risk youth intervention programs; or more recent critical perspectives that produce “an overly theoretical discourse analysis based critique of the problematization of youth” (cited in Kelly, 2000a, p. 309). Deeper understanding of social life, insists Swartz (1997), is the means for greater freedom, and ultimately, social change (p. 254). In this way, I am determined to critique social structure(s) rather than individuals, youth work rather than youth workers. Arguments that portray administrators, sponsors, and front line staff of youth organizations as conscious conspirators in a war against youth (see Grossberg, 2001 for this discussion) assume these individuals exist outside a world where youth discourse is pervasive and naturalised; a perspective Pierre Bourdieu refers to as “pernicious utopianism” (Honneth, Kocyba & Schwibs, 1986, cited in Holton, 2000, p. 90). Taking another (closer) look at at-risk youth intervention programs through this lens makes it possible to re-imagine the problematic posed by at-risk youth intervention programs, to think about at-risk youth intervention programs in terms more meaningful than permitted by a simple dichotomy, to grasp more accurately, more completely the subtleties of the
relations of social relations that inform, pressure, constrain, shape, promote at-risk youth intervention programs.

**Theoretical framework and key concepts**

I turn to Pierre Bourdieu, whose own work is an investigation of the struggle that is “how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of its members” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). Such a framework provides the means to examine “the conductorless orchestration” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 59) of the social life of at-risk youth intervention programs, neither mechanical nor conscious, but active (Thomson, 2008, p. 74). Bourdieu’s theory of action is “practical rather than discursive, pre-reflective rather than conscious, embodied as well as cognitive, durable though adaptive, reproductive though generative and inventive” (p. 101). 1 Bourdieu’s framework assumes “Social agents do not have ‘innate knowledge’ of what they are and what they do; more precisely, they do not necessarily have access to the reason for the discontent or their distress and the most spontaneous declarations can, with no intention of dissimulation, express something quite different from what they are apparently saying” (cited in Hamel, 1997, p. 102), thereby providing the thinking tools with which to trouble notions of truth, knowledge, choice, interest, action.

1 My reader may suggest the work of Michel Foucault would also be an appropriate theoretical framework for this project. While I acknowledge Foucault’s contribution to social theory (later, I specifically refer to his ideas on risk), I see Bourdieu’s theory of practice as offering to my project something Foucault’s does not necessarily; that is, a prereflective, internalised link between power and action, that which exists in the “universe of the undiscussed” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168).
Giroux (1999) explains that to conceptualise “culture as a medium of politics is important for progressive educations because it challenges theories of social and cultural reproduction that overemphasise power as a force of domination... how culture is deployed, represented, addressed, and taken up in order to understand how power works to produce not merely forms of domination but also complicity and dissent” (p. 16). Bourdieu’s theory as method approach emphasises research, learning, and knowledge as creative and ongoing processes, recognizes at-risk youth intervention programs as busy, complicated, and messy, and most importantly, challenges the aforementioned critical youth studies research which evidently neglects to consider “how power works to produce not merely forms of domination but also complicity and dissent” (Giroux, 1999, p. 16). My work benefits from Judith Bessant’s (2003) work before me, specifically her investigation of a recent trend for English, Australian, and Commonwealth youth policies to explicitly provide for greater opportunities for youth voice and participation in the democratic decision-making processes that precede their introduction. She found evidence of a forgivable mistake worth reflection; that is, “the idea that it is possible to bracket status differentials in the public sphere, and to deliberate as if all participants were social equals” (p. 97). In other recent research on youth using a Bourdieusian framework, Kennelly (2008) thinks about youth activism as a learned expression of cultural capital; Nugent (2008) analyses the role of Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field in the academic success of post-secondary students once-labeled at-risk; Threadgold (2009) explores how cultural capital and habitus mediate young Australians’ self-reflexivities and shape their perceptions of risk.
A consistent critique of Bourdieu’s work is the tricky position in which his theory relegates individual agency, a view perceived by many as over-deterministic, the impression being that individual social actors behave solely according to cultural structures. However, Bourdieu adamantly argued against such claims; firstly, by problematising the dualistic thinking implied in such a criticism, and subsequently, by insisting his theory was in fact a distinct alternative to both structuralist determinism and phenomenological individualism, a means of transcending the structure/agency debate altogether. Bourdieu imagines individuals and society not as two distinct or even separable entities, but rather as “two dimensions of the same social reality” (Swartz, 1997, p. 96). Likewise, my approach to at-risk youth intervention programs challenges similar “comfortable” dichotomies often relied upon in sociology and youth studies. My reader should notice my careful attention to, navigation, and negotiation of the either/or/both dilemma posed by collective social patterns and individual action.

Morag Schiach names a weakness of Bourdieu’s theory as providing a detailed model of “our enclosure,” without offering any strategies for social change (cited in Holton, 2000, p. 89). Indeed, Bourdieu concentrates heavily on the forces of domination at the expense of studying the power of agentic actions (see Holton, 2000, p. 91; also Deer, 2008, p. 123 for heterodoxy and orthodoxy). Bourdieu explains in response, that

Any effective—that is to say, discursively-based—action against the predispositions and presuppositions of doxa depends on the ability to identify the implicit on social relations, structures and unquestioned doxic categorization. The social scientist should therefore work at universalizing and democratizing the economic and cultural conditions of access to social scientific knowledge so as to universalize access to the universal, which is the only way to achieve a lasting undermining of doxa (in Deer, 2008, p. 129).
More simply, in other words, “You cannot fight what you don’t understand” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 112). Hence, identifying the struggle of youth is the first, perhaps the most resistant step to reforming at-risk youth intervention programs. My thesis relies on four key concepts (“thinking tools”) (Grenfell, 2008, p. 155) to guide my thinking about at-risk youth intervention programs: youth, doxa, field, and risk.

Youth

The problematic of youth is complex and multi-dimensional. In approaching questions like: what is youth?, how does youth appear in society?, and, how does/can youth serve as a useful sociological construct?, this thesis imagines youth in more than one way: firstly, sociologically, in terms of Bourdieu’s concept of doxa; and secondly, politically, as field, two versions of youth that are in fact cohesive and complementary, rather than competing, and thirdly, empirically, as youth appears and functions in a particular at-risk youth intervention program. In the first instance, I see youth not necessarily as a social category, but an abstract idea, something socially-constructed, ultimately arbitrary, yet very real. In the second instance, youth constitutes a social process, relationship, position, game. Finally, I see youth ultimately as a tool for shaping, rationalising, limiting at-risk youth intervention programs. Acknowledging the many versions of youth makes for closer investigation and deeper understanding of the struggle and the symbolic power that operates therein.

Doxa

Somewhere in the space between culture and domination, power and complicity, Bourdieu locates doxa, a social phenomenon he imagines as representing something like common sense, that which “cannot be said for lack of an available discourse,” where “the tradition is
silent, not least about itself as a tradition” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 165). To think about the
cases doxa appears and functions in at-risk youth intervention programs, I pose a question
based on a suggestion made by Tony and Mark K. Smith (1999), which is: What makes at-
risk youth programs specifically for at-risk youth? Likely responses reveal those
unanimously understood, yet rarely spoken, fundamental truths of youth as something
natural, objective, real. I conceptualise doxa—most neatly defined (for my purposes here)
by Webb et al. (2002) as a “set of core values and discourses which a field articulates as its
fundamental principles and which tend to be viewed as inherently true and necessary” (p.
xi). Doxa makes possible “the misrecognition of forms of social arbitrariness that
engenders the unformulated, non-discursive, but internalized and practical recognition of
that same social arbitrariness” (Deer, 2008, p. 119-120), contributing to and culminating in
“the near perfect correspondence between the social structures and mental structures,
between the objective order and the subjective organizing principles” (cited in Deer, 2008,
p. 121).

Bourdieu (2000) refers to doxa as a “primal state of innocence” (cited in Deer,
2008, p. 120)—presenting a lens with which to interrogate the ways in which doxa renders
youth, risk, and intervention knowable as truth in problematic ways. Critical reflection on
doxa generates and makes it possible to ask questions about the relationship between youth
and truth, knowledge and power, questions about what might be at stake. Bourdieu insists:
the “truth is the truth is at stake” (cited in Grenfell, 2008, p. 216); Grossberg (2001) adds,
“our ability to imagine” is at stake (p. 114). Doxa presents a lens with which to better
understand the disparity that exists so frequently “between people’s beliefs and the actions
and the positions they take,” also those discourses they accept, practice, fail to recognise,
fail to question (in Grossberg, 2001, pp. 125-126). Doxa constrains the perception, choices, and behaviour of social actors; informs best intentions and precludes critical reflection of youth discourse; and ultimately muddies the already-deep waters of at-risk youth intervention programs.

Field

Elsewhere, Kelly (2000a) suggests only within representational frameworks does truth have meaning (p. 312). In Wacquant (1989), Bourdieu defines a field as a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determination they impose upon occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situations (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) where possessions commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relations to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). Each field presupposes, and generates by its very functioning, the belief in the stakes it offers (p. 39).

Field requires social actors to “play the game,” each from his/her position in social space, as assigned, in part, by doxa (Deer, 2008, p. 125), the objective being for each player to activate his/her cultural capital so that s/he may impose his/her interests over others. I argue youth and young people are positioned in the field in relation to—most often in contrast to—adults and adulthood. Field is irreducible to individual action, appearing as objective and autonomous, but also interconnected to and overlapping with additional, related fields (Swartz, 1997, p. 123). To think about youth as field is to think about youth as a process rather than an empirical thing, to think relationally, to recognize at-risk youth intervention programs as existing within a greater structure of power (Swartz, 1997, p. 292), to expect a
certain complexity and commotion. An analysis of the field of youth is important to an investigation of common sense because it mediates the relationship between social structure and individual practice (Swartz, 1997, p. 9), and, in the same way, serves as the context for the construction and legitimisation of doxa (Deer, 2008, p. 120). Thinking about youth as field illuminates the “big picture” (Wyn & White, 1997) of the social life of at-risk youth intervention programs, to show how social structures determine the rules for the game, position players, set boundaries, referee play, and keep score (Deer, 2008 p. 122).

**Risk**

Peter Kelly (2000a) suggests that notions of *risk*—as both a recently-emerged social, political, ideological doxic phenomenon and an intersecting and overlapping field in itself—have “transformed problems offered by political, economic, and moral strategies and concerns, and... have made these problems thinkable in new ways and governable with new techniques” (p. 306). Elsewhere, Kelly (2006) suggests, “What is at stake in this game without end are ongoing struggles over who we should become” (p. 29), effectively linking youth and risk as both doxa and field. Risk revises youth as doxa by telling new truths in new ways; and also youth as a field, by intensifying, exaggerating, irritating relationships of power found there. The themes central to the Risk Society (Beck, 1992), namely, risk, un/certainty, future, control, complement the themes I identify as significant in the literature on youth, thus providing for especially rich discussion on at-risk youth intervention programs.
Research questions

It is through this lens, I pose my central research question as: How do notions of youth inform, pressure, constrain, shape, promote at-risk youth intervention programs, their purpose, practice, method? I begin by asking what truths are assumed, go unspoken, unconscious, unwitting of at-risk youth intervention program participants, their experience, their ways of knowing and being? “[T]he primary business of the sociology of risk appears to involve... dividing practices that distinguish between those who are at risk from certain ‘problems’ and those who are not” (Bessant, 2001, p. 32). Thus, I am also interested in those truths assumed of non-participants—adults, also not at-risk youth; in other words, how do at-risk youth intervention programs diagnose the problem, and subsequently define their purpose? Lubeck and Garrett (1990) suggest, “definitions implicitly suggest what should be done” (p. 328); accordingly, how do at-risk youth intervention programs recommend “best practice” in prescribing a solution? Finally, how do at-risk youth intervention programs conceptualise and measure success to justify its merit, promotion, even replication? I see these questions as guiding an exploration of doxa and field as envisioned and activated in one particular at-risk youth intervention program.

Methodology

Rattansi and Phoenix (1997) insist, “studies of youth identities cannot rely on methodologies such as survey research which only take account of ‘attitudes’ while ignoring the ethnographic necessity of close or ‘thick’ description of the myriad ways in which actual identities are constructed and reworked in different social contexts’ (p. 107). These methods merely scratch the surface of the problematic of youth, offering little more
than superficial testimonies of subjective reality, merely confirming my insistence of the
doxic attitude phenomenon. Alternately, to learn more about how youth as doxa and field
produce real consequences for at-risk youth intervention programs in real social space and
in real time, I investigate how youth(s), truth(s), and power operate for one particular self-
described at-risk youth intervention (*Crossroads*) that I see as providing for an especially
intriguing case study analysis.

A case study is particularly appropriate for this project because it makes possible an
analysis of at-risk youth intervention as a holistic process (Mason, 2002, p. 165), not to
overlook or belittle the complexity of youth and truth as a result of the limitations of
categorical thinking (p. 166). Of course, case study method is not to suggest that one at-risk
youth intervention program is representative of all, but rather an opportunity to apply
theories and test hypotheses about youth and truth and risk in the real life setting of just one
of many examples of at-risk youth intervention programs, to practise Bourdieu’s theory as
method, to imagine what is otherwise un/thinkable (ie., “What if youth, young people
counted/differently?”). The benefits of qualitative content analysis in particular—sensitivity
to detail, allowance for creativity, its means for transcending truth/myth—make it the most
practical, most promising, most appropriate research method to identify that which “goes
without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 167). To take
“relatively unstructured symbolic communications as data” (Krippendorf, 1980, p. 33) is to
separate the words on the page from the underlying, unspoken, (mis)understood meaning,
emotion, history, experience that is read between the lines and beyond the text, to
deconstruct and decode implicit ideas into explicit, meaningful information, to surface
ideas that formerly went (and would otherwise go) undetected (Mason, 2002). Lesko (2001) explains

“These systems of reasoning can be described and analyzed in various terms: as emblematic of modernity, as colonial, as gendered, and as administrative, among others. While conventional sociohistorical accounts usually focus on particular human agents and actions, to concentrate on processes of reasoning shifts the analysis from person-centred histories. If systems of reasoning... are the source of action and change, they must also be the focus of inquiry” (p. 8).

Site

*Crossroads* is in fact the pseudonym given by me to a self-described “at-risk” youth intervention program currently operating since 1984 in a mid-sized city (population <100,000) in South-western Ontario, Canada. Young people ages 12-17 years are referred by police, judicial authorities, their school, a fellow youth agency, or their parents to participate in one of six Crossroads programs for young people, including one especially/only for girls to address relational aggression issues, one designed to address substance abuse questions in particular, another as an alternative to in-class school for suspended students grades 7 through 12, also a seventh parent(ing) program designed for guardians of young people. Their flagship program is *Real Choices* (also a pseudonym which closely represents its original). Youth participants are most often referred to this program based on their recent involvement with the criminal court system, unsatisfactory

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2 Use of a pseudonym protects the identity of the selected agency and thus the individuals who are associated with it; however, my preference to use a pseudonym originates not from any academic obligation (for my data is taken exclusively from public documents), but from my efforts to ensure the social structure of at-risk youth intervention programs remains the subject of my critique rather than any one specific agency.
performance in school, and/or consistent conflict in their home. Over ten weekly evening sessions, screened and trained adult volunteers (“coaches”) lead interactive discussions and thinking exercises with/for young people in small groups to promote “constructive social skill development.”

What makes Crossroads especially suitable for a case study of doxa and field and at-risk youth intervention programs is its consistent, extraordinarily favourable reputation in the local community, as well as across Ontario and Canada as an effective and valuable model of for at-risk youth intervention program basically since its inception in 1984, twenty-six years ago. Crossroads has been recognized through the support (financial and otherwise, ie. referrals) of multiple government bodies (Ministries of Children and Youth, and Attorney General, Ontario Trillium Foundation, district public and separate school boards, Mayor’s Honour List); various private organizations (Charity Intelligence Canada, The Fraser Institute/Donner Canadian Foundation Awards); other non-profit organizations (ie. United Way, IODE, a variety of neighbourhood service clubs, ie. Optimists); corporate and individual charitable donors; also community leaders, police, schools, families. I understand such considerable, widespread endorsement suggests Crossroads indeed shares the same perspective of reality as greater mainstream society in regards to truths of at risk youth intervention programs. Such accolades and support suggest Crossroads is a practical example of at-risk youth intervention programs.

Further, Crossroads’ twenty-six years of youth programming offers an opportunity to observe this at-risk youth intervention program as it has shaped and been shaped, focused and expanded since well over two decades, alongside significant social events, key political campaigns, and the ongoing, gradual emergence and transformation of various
cultural ideologies adapting to and adapted by individuals, groups, and social structures through time and space. Crossroads was launched the same year (1984) that Canada’s Young Offender Act (YOA) was made effective (replacing the Juvenile Delinquents Act, since 1908) (Dobson, 1988, Easterby, 1990), new legislation which made provisions for community-based extrajudicial measures for young people aged 12-18 years, charged with minor crimes (most often shoplifting), intended as either a diversion from costly, time-consuming court proceedings and criminal charges, or a condition of probation, or else an alternative to custody upon conviction (Zandbergen, 1987). Seeing “a need” (Fitzmaurice, 1989) for such a program (Crossroads was, and as far as I am aware, still is, the only program of its kind in the county), the then-current city police Youth Bureau Officer, along with a retired industrial office manager and a housewife (not my term) (cite) came together to launch the Crossroads program. The model was adopted from an existing program written by an independent American research institute (Egan, 1989) (“inspired by Thomas Jefferson’s challenge to pursue truth”) (see www.jeffersoninst.org) and adapted according to the work of a local clinical psychologist.

My analysis is especially interested in Crossroads at/about/after the mid-1990’s, at which time a meaningful combination of social events—rather than any single event—had similar effects and significant impacts, individually and collectively, on the shape and structure of the Crossroads program. My literature review identifies a few particular events in these years that are particularly significant to an analysis of at-risk youth intervention programs. Firstly, the Risk Society emerged as a way of understanding un/certainty, in/security, risk and prevention; secondly, “at-riskness” entered common educational, youth work, and social service lexicon as a popular, acceptable method of measurement,
identification, qualification of the risk posed by particular events/individuals; also, Mike Harris’ Progressive Conservatives’ elected rise to power in Ontario—their platform ironically named the “Common Sense Revolution”—was indication of, and made way for modern neoliberal ideologies which prioritized right-wing agendas over the previous welfare state (in Cairns, 2007, p. 58). Bessant (2001) explains

> It is more than a coincidence that the modern talk of youth at risk has emerged at a time when the public policy and the public culture of so many western countries have been reshaped by a resurgence of liberal individualism. Without reducing the emergence of talk about risk to an expression of resurgent liberalism, it seems that there are some affinities between the two (p. 35).

For Crossroads in particular, the mid-1990’s also brought the hiring of a new (current) agency director, a shift from a curriculum based on issues of self-esteem to a curriculum based on “life skills” (more on this later), also what I perceive as an administrative, thus ideological shift from a small, volunteer-run grass-roots agency, to a not-for-profit charitable organisation with a paid staff (though still dependent on volunteers), substantial external funding sources, considerable expansion in services and scope.

Finally, I also want to briefly address what makes Crossroads somewhat of an outlier at-risk youth intervention program, especially in Canada, a country with a reputation of multiculturalism, which is, the relatively homogeneous community (at least visibly) in which it operates and the likewise population it serves. Statistics Canada (2006) reports, for example, just four percent of the population identify as a visible minority, 97% of all residents are Canadian citizens; less than ten percent of the population speak a first language other than English or French. Growing up in this county and attending high school here less than ten years ago, most of my peers looked very much like me and my
white, middle-class, Christian, English-speaking, nuclear family. Now, of course, like youth as a social status, I acknowledge that other important dimensions of power and privilege certainly operate in similarly subtle, often non-visible ways, and of course, Crossroads inevitably encounters those differences; however, I see how the seeming lack of (visible) difference in this mid-sized city is meaningful for both the imagination and operation of Crossroads, and subsequently what may be perceived as my inattention to or inadequate account of Crossroads’ approach to young people of other marginalised (ie. racialised) groups. My reader should know that because Crossroads in particular, on account of its home demographic, presents a unique challenge in which to explore the ways at-risk youth intervention programs address the ways dimensions of (minority) identit(ies) (including gender) interact with youth and at-riskness, I leave this discussion for another paper.

Data collection

My project includes two main data sources; firstly, publically-available program documents, which I downloaded and printed from the agency’s website, and secondly, an ample assortment of written news articles on Crossroads as published in local newspapers. The program material is informational and promotional produced by the Crossroads organisation, including the agency’s website (featuring links to the Board of Directors, each of seven program pages, a Volunteer recruitment page, Evaluation results, Crossroads awards and sponsors); also recent Crossroads agency newsletters published twice annually (Spring 2007- Spring 2010); and recent Crossroads Annual Reports (2007-2010). I also include a sample of news articles published in Crossroads’ local newspaper, 1988-2008. These articles were gathered from the agency’s own archives collection, to which I was
generously given access by the agency Director. I took one morning at Crossroads’ agency office to browse the collection and photocopy all those articles that pertained specifically to the agency and its programs (setting aside all those articles that I deemed not directly related to my purpose, ie. award recipients and funding announcements, news reports on youth violence, mental health, and bullying, for example).

**Reading strategy**

Content analysis recognises how “language is immediately related to common sense and power” (Holton, 2000, p. 92). Bourdieu (1991) locates language as a meaningful tool to decode doxa and map the logic of practice in the field. He says

> The all-purpose word in the dictionary, a product of the neutralization of the practical relations within which it functions, has no social existence: in practice, it is always immersed in situations, to such an extent that the core meaning which remains relatively invariant through the diversity of markets may pass unnoticed… The different meanings of a word are defined in relation between the invariant core and the specific logic of different markets, themselves objectively situated with respect to the market in which the most common meaning is defined (cited in Grenfell, 1998, p. 78).

Mason (2002) suggests printed material is always a product of the field in which it exists, therefore it serves as a meaningful representation of the knowledge, processes, and relationships found there. Written documents are cultural manifestations that reflect seldom spoken, rarely questioned, yet widely understood common sense understandings of truth. Hence, I suggest the Crossroads website serves as not only promotional material for prospective sponsors, partners, and participants, and an informational guide for interested visitors; but also implicitly constructs a narrative about non/ideal participants and leaders,
their in/experience, im/practical strategies, un/desirable outcomes. I see Crossroads newsletters as conveying more than merely events and announcements, and Crossroads Annual Reports as more than just numbers and statistics regarding revenue and expenses, participants, and outcomes; these documents present evidence intended to justify and reaffirm Crossroads continued operation, ideology, and value.

Likewise, I expect these news articles to communicate more than words and sentences, headlines and conclusions; also what is taken for granted in media and community discussions about at-risk youth intervention programs, the youth who do/not participate, how, and why. Judith Bessant (2001) insists, “Knowledge about ‘youth at risk’ is usually not gained through our immediate experience” (p. 33), implicating printed material, especially news media, as important players in the construction and reproduction of doxa in the field, filtering truths, making space for some, limiting others. Juxtaposed against each other, printed material, especially including some published over a range of periods of time, can reveal the fluidity and temporal- and physical-specificity of doxa and field. Analysis of news articles is particularly interesting for the purposes of this project, for media is an inherently “adult-created and –based world (Schissel, 1997, p. 12), “morality-laden language and the talk of privileged” (p. 14).

A common critique on qualitative analysis of written data is the concern that “words and meanings become almost too real, or more real than the phenomena they represent” (Grenfell, 1999, p. 36-37). Indeed, an intriguing paradox essential to (and found throughout) this thesis is that words prove both extremely significant and largely irrelevant to knowing the dilemma posed by youth, understanding at-risk youth intervention programs. Let me elaborate. Firstly, unlike many scholars before me, I do not necessarily
dispute the use of labels (ie. at-risk youth) in educational discourse and equity studies; the identification of particular individuals/groups is unavoidably the first step in providing greater access and opportunity to those who would not otherwise have equal privilege. It is my perspective that labels in general are not problematic—so long as the words are interpreted, applied, used critically. Consider Kitty te Riele’s (2006) straightforward solution to what she sees as the negative consequences of the at-risk label: she proposes that this specific label be replaced with an alternative, apparently more accurate, equitable term (“marginalized”) to better conceptualise the experience of the individual, not as some personal deficiency but rather a struggle against the forces of social inequality. She insists, “use of this term easily leads to the question: marginalized by who or what? This is logically answered by considering aspects of society and schooling” (p. 140, emphasis added). Though she evidently understands the need to “interrupt habitual readings” (p. 141), she fails to consider how this makes possible the misrecognition of “the things of logic as the logic of things” (Marx, see Bourdieu, 1990, p. 61).

Rather, what ultimately happens is that new labels simply come to replace earlier ones, functioning—just as those before—in similarly oppressive ways (Placier, 1996; Bessant, 2001, p. 32; Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 337) finds. Placier (1996) in particular shows how the at-risk label was originally introduced in the 1980s as an alternative to the term ‘culturally deprived’ that pervaded educational discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, now regarded as politically incorrect. By simply replacing the language, without critical reflection, the problematic persists, unquestioned, unchallenged, untouched. Thus, I see “language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as world view” (Bakhtin, in Holton, p. 92).
In other words, I take as my research subject not words per se, but rather, the constructed meaning that is (unconsciously) expressed through language, the social histories, processes and relationships that lie just beneath, between the lines and beyond the text.

**Limitations**

A limitation to my theory and method which I struggle to keep in check is what I know (from my experience as a researcher myself also involved youth programming) to be a disconnect between theory and practice; that is, the discrepancy between a close perspective and another from afar, that which makes it seem easier to *imagine* a hypothetical situation than *be in* a hypothetical situation, the truths of practice not yet explored (see Swartz, 1997, pp. 273-274). This is important here because the proposed content analysis examines only theoretical documents believed to shape practice; and also, because scholars, it seems to me, since their knowledge depends on their own personal perception and interpretation, have a tendency to imagine a most ideal type, to oversimplify reality, to overlook important contextual details, especially constraints, pressures, crucial to an objective theoretical analysis of practice. Hugh Mehan (1992), evidently influenced by Bourdieu, in his journal article entitled “Understanding inequality in schools: The contribution of interpretive studies,” discusses what he calls “constitutive action,” and, significant to this project, how the “macrostructure” of educational fields (for example, aggregate numbers of young people, at-risk identification, and at-risk youth intervention programs) are ultimately subject to “organizationally predictable microevents” (such as
institutional practices, administrative anti-/pre-requisites, un/available resources). My point: the proposed research is essentially an attempt to bring to light the invisible constraints imposed by common sense on the realities of youth work practice; yet, of course, as I concentrate my attention here, I admit there must be other invisible constraints involved in this tug of war, many of which I am unaware, each worthy of further attention. I do my best to acknowledge such “microevents” as they appear in the case study, which leads me to consider the importance of reflexive practice, an issue central to my discussion of doxa, field, and domination.

A Note on reflexivity

Bourdieu (1999) poses a mostly rhetorical question: “How can we [as critical sociological scholars] claim to engage in the scientific investigations of presuppositions if we do not work to gain knowledge of our own presuppositions?” (p. 608) Of particular concern here is Kelly’s (2000a) insistence to hold “those who do youth studies” especially responsible for the ways youth and at-risk youth intervention programs have been rendered knowable. Many scholars (including Kelly, 2000a; Lesko, 1999; Bessant & Watts, 1998) have addressed the problematic of youth as an “artefact” of expertise (Kelly, 2000a). Bessant (2001) explains, “Knowledge about ‘youth at risk’ is usually not gained through our immediate experience, but rather through the investigations that constitute the knowledge of experts” (p. 33). “The interconnections between regulations of behaviour and knowledge

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3 For example, Mehan et al. (in Mehan, 1992) found in their investigation of special education programs that the number of students identified as having multiple physical handicaps was related to the financial cost per student for the school district to provide special education programming.
construction and use in the social sciences and in education are central... Thus theories must be seen as part of interactional social processes, with particular effects in and on the ways in which adolescence and adolescents exist and mean” (Lesko, 1996, p. 142). Kelly (2006) discusses youth studies’ task of ensuring their work critiques youth objectively, rather than simply critiquing media representations of youth as it appears in popular media, historical representations, and the like (p. 30). Swartz (1997) insists reflexivity means better science, more responsible intellectual contribution.

A sound discussion of the reflexivity of at-risk youth intervention programs demands reflexive practice on my own part. Hence, I acknowledge my privilege—and responsibility— as I contribute to youth studies’ body of literature. My privilege is the opportunity to assume a view somewhat removed from my social position; that is, the theoretical view I have learned about the social world as operating external to myself (though, of course, I remain somewhat constrained by what I know/not). Bourdieu (1990) rightfully traces this possibility to my past/recent/current formal education, which suggests a certain social position, one of cultural and economic capital (cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 273-4).

On a related point, my extensive experience in both the theoretical, academic sphere of sociology and youth studies and also that of the practical everyday certainly informs a unique perspective from which to approach the problematic of at-risk youth intervention programs. I acknowledge my own position in relation to the Crossroads program: Crossroads and I both originate from the same hometown; in fact, Crossroads just a couple years older than I. My close geographical proximity to Crossroads’ home means that I have personal knowledge of the program, the work they do, the role the program has in the
community. Additionally, I maintain relationships with more than one graduate of the program, also more than one adult volunteer leader. This relationship is not necessarily a limitation to objective, ethical research; but it certainly informs my perspective of Crossroads, its staff, its participants. This perspective affords me both the invitation to critically reflect on my reality and the realities of social life, and also the opportunity to have personally witnessed time and again the extraordinary dedication and enthusiasm of so many adults, who, as far as I can see, genuinely care for the interests and well-being of the young people whom they teach and with whom they learn.
Chapter 2

This chapter begins with an excerpt from Lawrence Grossberg’s (2001) article, entitled, “Why Does neo-liberalism hate kids? The War on youth and the culture of politics.” I quote Grossberg here at length for a few reasons: firstly, because his idea provides an ideal departure point for my project; secondly, because it foreshadows well the main argument(s) of this chapter; and finally, to be completely honest, because Grossberg so brilliantly articulates for me an idea I had wanted to imagine but found myself unable to express, a question I did not know how to ask, a recurring itch that consistently goes unscratched, yet somehow soothed. He writes:

There’s something troubling about politicizing youth. The traditional (modern) discourse of youth inevitably and necessarily places youth outside of and distinct from the realm of politics, as if youth were in a natural state outside the social... As Lee Edelman puts it, regarding discussions of children, it’s as if the issue of childhood only has one side. Afterall, who could be (and what would it even mean to be) against children. ‘Childhood is so uncontested, because so uncontroversial, a cultural value’ in our society. No politician would stand up and say, ‘I’m against children.’ And yet I think that is precisely what the actions and rhetoric of our society, and our politicians, do say... That is, I have been trying to argue that youth (childhood) is no longer so uncontested, but that we have difficulty recognizing the contest partly because we cannot begin to imagine what is at stake” (p. 132).

In this chapter, following Grossberg’s lead, I reflect critically on this thing called youth, to ask what is youth?; and/or, how can youth be reimagined as a struggle, something uneasy, unexpected, unnatural? By resisting the instinct to fall back on common sense knowledge that defines youth only as the pages of Merriam-Webster would have me know, I trouble how youth is taken up, appears, functions, in theory, policy, and practice as something common sensical, and uncover a certain curiousness about youth as a social category, “so democratized, so
commonsensical, and so trivialized‖ (Lesko, 2001, p. 10). I engage with “practical and theoretical events” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140) in current critical sociology and youth studies literature to argue with Grossberg, against notions of youth as “outside of and distinct from the realm of politics, as if youth were in a natural state outside the social... uncontested... uncontroversial...” “This ‘denaturalizing’ of conceptions of adolescents involves calling into question key assumptions through rhetorical, historical, and feminist rereading of the production of particular knowledge of adolescents” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140). Indeed, “there is no other way except imaginatively to make sense of what is going on” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 114).

In the second part of the chapter I propose a reimagining of youth and truth using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice. Engaging a theoretical framework of Bourdieu’s concepts of doxa, firstly, and secondly, field, I present an alternative, productive, new way to decode the contest that is youth, to think about youth as truth socially constructed through complex, social processes of knowledge production and meaning-making. From here, I reposition youth against the relations of the relations from which it emerges to re-imagine youth as a struggle, to show how youth is ultimately something political, yet subsequently escapes reflection, evades detection, and compromises good intention, hence making possible a rhetoric of “anti-youth racism” (as in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 99).

**Theorizing youth and truth: Literature review**

At my favourite local coffee shop one afternoon, I accidentally came across this headline in the Toronto Star: “What a 9 year old thinks,” “The Secret lives of girls. Part of a year-long series” (see Ormsby & Scrivener, 2010). Although the 65 young people who participated in the discussion groups that informed this article are girls aged nine and ten years, somewhat younger
than ‘youth’ per se is usually imagined, the article presents a creative, practical tool for both learning and teaching the ways that age in general, youth in particular, appears and functions as truth in school, youth work, and community, in social institutions like law and mainstream media, in popular discussion, in Canada today. I see how “Focusing on the public sphere is a useful place to start because it is there that hegemonic ideas and cultural common-sense about young people are constructed and perpetuated” (Bessant, 2003, p. 97).

“It’s a crucial stage,” says the author’s introduction, that is, a stage characterised by a naive optimism, attachment to family, vulnerability to bullies, ambivalence to the future, an aversion to shopping malls, the colour pink, all things deemed fashionable. “This age” is measured in school days and math tests, friendships, appearance, and peer pressure; gender roles, career aspirations, hopes and fears for the future. This transitional “moment” is only the “beginning” of some journey, where adulthood lies “on the horizon,” “possibilities boundless.” “They sense they are on the cusp of change.” One girl, Alexandra, uses the pronoun “we” to refer to her membership in some identified group (“We’re perfect the way we are”). Expert testimony (namely, a university professor of youth studies) and “A 2006 study in the Journal of School Health” confirms these “creatures” are somehow distinctly unlike adults (“I don’t think adults really know anything about what girls are doing”). The words youth/childhood/girlhood are used somewhat interchangeably, with ease and without question, to refer to an empirical group of individuals of similar age, stage, transition, qualities, experience, identity. The article comfortably claims that “The truth is...” and “Another reality is...” In fact, this story about youth seemed less about young people, more an unspoken conversation with age, bodies, experts and statistics, time, future and adulthood, identity and difference, truth, myth, and reality...
The headline I spotted on the front page of the Star directing me to page A9 would presumably lead readers to expect a report about young people, a group of similarly-aged individuals, their common experience, an empirical thing; but, as I read, I circled specific words, sentences, paragraphs, marked ??? next to others, drew arrows from here to there and back again, and scribbled notes in the margins. Amid the words, between the lines, and all over the page, I encountered a number of unsettling contradictions about youth, I sensed a certain romanticism, I took issue with a number of (unfair, unfounded) hidden assumptions. I struggled to understand exactly the story the article wanted to tell.

On Nancy Lesko’s (2001) suggestion, I sort youth studies literature according to two divergent perspectives of youth: first, a biological framework which sees youth determined by “natural and naturally occurring” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140) age-based abilities, qualities, experiences; and second, a sociohistorical perspective in which youth is a complex social process, constructed in and through “particular contexts and institutional arrangements” (Lesko, 2001, p. 7). Of course, they are not separable for sure; rather, they overlap often and always, weaving a complicated story about youth and young people—also adults and adulthood.

A biological framework of youth evokes some “apparent symmetry between biological and social processes” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 9). I see how the title alone—that is, the sorting and selection of only nine- and 10-year olds—is not unintentional, but instead an unspoken expectation that these 65 individuals share in common something other than age and grade. I need not look far: According to “What a 9 year old thinks,” apparently, “It’s a feature of childhood being so open and susceptible to fear and panic,” also what is referred to as “childlike assuredness,” and (of girlhood in particular) a “loooooove” for shopping. Lesko (1996 and 2001)
interrogates seemingly arbitrary divisions of age by exploring the phenomenon of graded education, where age is accepted as indication of academic achievement, intellectual in/ability, physical im/maturity, life in/experience. Likewise, Jeffs and Smith (1999) ask of age-based youth programs: What makes, for example, the underachievement of a young person radically different from that of an adult, arguing instead, “people’s difficulties rarely flow from age but, rather, poverty, family circumstances, health and the like... long-term and... deep-rooted...” (The counter-case section, para. 5.) These authors bring up relations of power and domination, comparing “Young people [as] another country—to be visited, understood, and...colonized” (p. 55; emphasis added). My supervisor reminds me: where there is prejudice, there is power.

Credible expert testimony validates the representation of youth put forth by the “What a 9 year old thinks” experiment, including two academic professors (one, of child and youth studies, the other communications studies, specializing in “tween studies”), a youth organisation program manager, and a handful of any given research studies and statistical data. A recent (2003) example from an American legal brief argues for diminished culpability of young people for “The evidence is now strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early 20s in those relevant parts that govern...characteristics that make people morally culpable” (Ortiz, cited in Côté & Allahar, 2006, p. 18)—not particularly surprising, since there is no shortage of scientific research that documents the apparent state of incompletion, immaturity, incompetence of young people, youth as a biological stage, a transition from childhood to adulthood. Lesko (1996) problematises widespread acceptance of “allowing the biological processes to stand as real truths outside social process. We must examine the ontological assertions regarding adolescence and the biological research that establishes them as natural and inevitable” (p. 144). Likewise, Kelly (2000a) “suggests that youth can be understood as an artefact of both these diverse forms of expertise
[medical, psychological, professional], and of attempts by these expert systems [government, institutions] to regulate the behaviours and dispositions of populations of youth” (see also Lesko, 1996; Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 10). It follows that, as Wyn and White (1997) insist, “The challenge for policy is that once young people’s lives are taken seriously, it is impossible to retain the comfortable notion that there exists a mainstream of young people who will be served by a policy oriented towards a homogeneous group” (p. 111).

A biological framework of youth assumes young people follow a linear, one-way journey to a predetermined destination; hence, “teenagers cannot go backward to childhood nor forward to adulthood before ‘their time’ without incurring derogatory labels, such as ‘immature,’ ‘loose,’ or ‘stupid’” (Lesko, 2001, p. 123). In this way, youth are burdened by the resultant constant state of becoming—“becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible” (Kelly, 2001, p. 30)—never being, a misleading and problematic either/or dualism. In “What a 9 year old thinks,” Future is the conversation topic most thoroughly discussed (over Identity, Fears, Equality). The article notes that “most [girls] look forward to careers.” Bourdieu (1993) likens the beginning and end points of youth to those of wealth—ambiguous on account of its subjectiveness (p. 94).

A linear view of youth (such is this) imposes on young people an individualised and “naive assumption of control and choice” (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005, p. 102). Coles (1995) measures youth by transitions (from school, parental home, family of orientation, to work, home, family of procreation), which functions much like a classic game of Chutes and Ladders (p. 21), whereby some players are granted opportunities to ascend the top ranks, while others linger not far from where they started. Such an approach indeed troubles notions of choice, power, and
privilege, and also reveals the homogeneity implied by biological youth frameworks. Jeffs and Smith (1999) satirize the prospect of youth as “an imagined mainstream in which the majority of young people neatly go forward in a uni-directional way towards some magical moment when adulthood is conferred” (Transition section, para. 1)—that is, “an imagined mainstream” unmarked by gender (also youth studies; see McRobbie, 2000; also Lesko, 1996, p. 145), class, race, dis/ability, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity (see also Kelly, 2003; Côté & Allahar, 2006; Wyn & White, 1997, Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005).

The biological perspective of youth implies the possibility of “a ‘presocial’ self” (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 53) by imagining youth and young people as outside society and history (Lesko, 2001, p. 7). Upon some investigative work (involving the 65 portraits that surround the perimeter of the full-page spread of “What a 9 year old thinks,” a basic knowledge of the social geography of Toronto, and a few elementary math equations), I estimate that over half the girls included in the group discussions attend The Bishop Strachan School, therefore representing a very select, especially privileged group of individuals. The remaining girls represent the communities of Jane/Finch, Regent Park, and the children in care of Toronto Native Child and Family Services. Somehow, 65 girls from 4 schools in Toronto, over half of whom attend a private girls’ academy in one of the city’s most wealthy neighbourhoods, the others from at least two of Toronto’s “priority neighbourhoods,” portray “what’s on the minds of Grade 4 girls” in general, as what seems like a single, universal version of youth. I see this as a commentary on the embodiment of youth—or, more accurately, the disembodiment of youth. Tilley (2003) posits, “a universal ‘what works’ is misguided and unachievable. A more ‘realist’ approach would be to ask the rather more complex and contingent question of ‘what works for whom in what circumstances, and how?’” (cited in Muncie, 2006, p. 777-78). Relevant here is Durkheim’s (1912) note that
“Impersonality and stability are the two characteristics of truth” (cited in Lemert, 2000, p. 94). (Later, I discuss the stability of youth specifically in more detail.)

As an alternative to the weaknesses posed by a biological definition of youth presented here, Côté and Allahar (2006) take up youth as shaped by and through social forces, especially educational and economic opportunities, from a sociohistorical perspective. Paradoxically, this approach both complements and challenges the ‘biology is destiny’ philosophy of a biological view, confronting the essentialism and homogeneity implied therein, yet maintaining a reification of time as progress. Scholars working from this sociohistorical perspective show how common sense understanding of youth has evolved since its “discovery,” having now expanded to include those as young as 13, and those up to 30 years old (Furstenberg, 2000, p. 899). These patterns, they say, reveal the “constructedness and mutability” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140) of youth; suggesting, “it is not the relations between ages that creates change or stability in society, but change in society which explains relations between different ages” (Allan, 1968 cited in Wyn & White, 1997, p. 8). From the introduction to Côté and Allahar’s (2006) Critical Youth Studies: A Canadian Focus

The clearest trend we identified was the increasingly prolonged transitional period between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adulthood caused by the diminished workplace opportunities available to the young... Young Canadians should take a particular interest in these studies because they show how their experiences are shared by others around the world (p. xii).

Indeed, the concept of youth has a long history in Canadian culture (Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 6), dating back to the turn of the 20th century. Prior to 1900, “there was no easily identifiable group of young people of certain ages who acted, dressed, and spoke in ways that were markedly different from those of other age groups” (Cultice, 1992, cited in Côté & Allahar,
In 1905, Stanley G. Hall (often referred to as the “father of adolescence” for his “discovery” of youth) published *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, religion, and Education* (Lesko, 2001, p. 50; also 1996, p. 144). Côté and Allahar (2006) discuss youth as a product of the emergence of youth consumer culture in the 1930s, compounded by the introduction of mass compulsory education after 1940, also the explosion of specifically youth pop culture of the 1960s, and accelerated by the rapid pace of social change in the 1970s, including shifting age demographics (for example, the so-called Baby Boomer generation), several significant changes in patterns of education (credentialism), work, home and family structure (also see Furstenberg, 2000). Grossberg (2001) is especially concerned with what he calls the “American Revolution,” as marked by the election of Ronald Reagan as American President in 1981, materialising as wide-spanning disapproval of education and subsequent broad reform efforts, and an increased reliance on ultimately normative prison and mental health institutions (among other social changes) (p. 117). Grossberg insists “[these trends have] taken a definite—dark and more absurd—turn in 1990s” (p. 117).

What a sociohistorical perspective contributes is the possibility for more than one version of youth; in fact, imagined as a social construction, youth is able to accommodate for an infinite number of youths (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005; Bessant, 2001, p. 32). Many scholars (see Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005; Kelly, 2003; Bessant, 2001, McRobbie, 2000) have explored the ways in which youth interacts with race, class, gender, dis/ability, and other dimensions of identity in over-lapping and interconnecting ways; perhaps, as Côté and Allahar (2006) simplify it, like some almost-mathematical formula like (youth x race x gender, etc.) (p. xvi). In this way, Leder (1990) distinguishes between the physical body versus the “lived body” of youth (cited in Lesko,

However, Robert Holton (2000) (for one) troubles the sociohistorical perspective as an overly passive view of youth, for history is the sole agent of change (p. 94). Pearson (1983) troubles this perspective in another way: “there are considerable difficulties involved in making sense of a history or repetitive concern about young people where there is a ‘stability which repetitiously identifies some aspect of ‘social change’ as the cause of the loosening of tradition, but which is itself paradoxically immune to change” (cited in Bessant and Watts, 1998, p. 7). Bessant and Watts suggest youth in this way is more likely merely “part of a tradition of myth-making” (Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 6, my emphasis). It seems “each generation believes itself uniquely threatened by the signs and symptoms of decay and degeneration” (Pearson, cited in Bessant, 2001, p. 34); in other words, “Usually adult concerns for the next generation resemble the same issues their own parents worried about” (Furstenberg, 2000, p. 904; also Bessant, 2001, p. 34). Indeed, Grossberg (2001) cites a USA Today survey published 1998 that concludes, “9 out of 10 Americans say it is harder to raise kids to be good people than it was 20 years ago” (p. 119-120). In “What a 9 year old thinks,” the article sees the girls as “on the cusp of change.” The authors and experts discuss the increasing commodification of young people as “terrifying”—which I expect very similar to the sentiments of parents in the early 1980s, at the initial emergence of “The tween market.”

A sociohistorical perspective is also problematic in the way youth is constructed determined by trends in work and education, therefore ultimately economic (see Lesko, 1996, p. 145; Lesko, 2001, p. 7), raising questions about interests and motivation. Among youth studies
research and literature, an overwhelming pattern exists; that is, research questions related to youth employment and youth delinquency garner far more attention than other aspects of young people’s lives (Furstenberg, 2000, p. 900). Though these themes may seem unrelated and arbitrary, this particular combination is curious. In her thesis project entitled “Partnership, community, and the Young Entrepreneur: Exploring educational partnerships in Canada,” Kate Cairns (2007) links educational partnerships (a shared initiative between a school and a private business or non-profit organisation with primarily economic goals) to concepts of community, citizenship, governance, and youth in general. She concludes that youth citizenship and personhood are conceptualised in mostly economic terms, measured according to narratives of authority, self-reliance, self-governance, performativity, responsibilization, and other values of neoliberalist policy and capitalist business strategies (p. 74).

Further evidence of the myths of youth, and significant to an analysis of the media’s portrayal of youth is the frequent contradictions of youth that arise. In one instance, Green and Bigum (1993) worry: “And the awful possibility presents itself, insistently: [youth] aren’t simply visiting us, after which they’ll simply go away; rather, they are here to stay, and they’re taking over” (p. 122, cited in Kelly, 2003). In another instance, “commentators like Eckersley talk about [young people as victims] in terms such as ‘a suicide a day’” (cited in Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 9). This contradiction begins from a biological framework of youth as incomplete and incompetent, builds on a sociohistorical view of youth as future adults, and seems to lead to Rose’s (1989, p. 121) reference to youth as “the most intensively governed sector of personal existence” (cited in Muncie, 2006), as adult effort to control the future outcome of this threat/victim jeopardy, adult effort to manage young people according to the intended political and/or social purpose.
In this way, a sociohistorical framework fails to depart in any significant way from “the dominant view of adolescence,” which is “the naturalised, biologized adolescent” (Lesko, 2001, p. 7), biologically less-than their more adult counterparts, thus developing, deficient. Homiletic language, what Lesko (1996) calls a “mix of patriarchal preaching and scientific gospel” (p. 149), as in Chapter Three of Côté and Allahar’s (2006) Critical Youth Studies, entitled, “The Discovery of youth: Social-scientific attempts to explain coming of age processes” (emphasis added) maintains youth as a sort of obligatory requisite to obtain something expectantly greater (Lesko, 1996, p. 152). From this, I recognize a reification of time as progress, and an ensuing hierarchy that positions adults and young people in relation to one another, as groups and as individuals.

This sociohistorical perspective also fails to recognise or challenge the significance of referring to young people as something fundamentally different (Lesko, 2001, p. 7; also Jeffs & Smith, 1999) for example, “creatures” who inhabit the world “in sophisticated ways adults don’t recognize.” Once again, the sorting and selection of 65 nine- and ten-year old girls for “What a 9 year old thinks” is meaningful here, for the implication that this group of individuals are significantly different than adults, mostly, but also boys, and even the girls their mothers once were. Rather, Jeffs and Smith (1999) present findings that speak to the overwhelming commonalities that exist in youth and adult learning processes (Tennant, 1997; cited in Youth development section, para. 3) and also among young people’s, their parents’, and grandparents’ beliefs on “family life, the work ethic, the inherent value of education and existing social arrangements,” also community, career prospects, parenting, and crime (respective views on gender roles and leisure time vary somewhat) (Industrial Society, 1997, cited on p. 56). Regardless, Kelly (2000a) describes youth studies as an experiment in “youth, of what to do with
them, of how to school them, or police them, or regulate them, or house them, or employ them...” (p. 463), essentially, a discipline that sees and treats youth as objects. Throughout “What a 9 year old thinks,” several contrasts are drawn between young people and adults, whereby youth is constructed as a sort of spectacle, a phenomenon, to be studied from a third-person rather than first-person perspective. Elsewhere, Kelly (2000b) suggests adults’ “fascination for, and fetishization of [young people as] the Other” (cited on p. 463). Kelly (2000a) concludes this sociohistorical approach is therefore descriptive rather than critical inquiry (p. 308)—“superficial” (Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 7).

The version of youth in “What a 9 year old thinks” is too predictable, too charming, limited, biased, even self-contradicting; the brief definition of youth found on the pages of Merriam-Webster too tidy. Neither the biological nor sociohistorical perspectives therein engage young people and their experiences in any meaningful way, for, whether imagined to be a social category based on age and assumed corresponding abilities, qualities, experiences, or the social experience of being a young person, youth remains a “natural and naturally occurring” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140) transition to adulthood, and young people remain ultimately fundamentally different from adults. However, though I have no interest in determining a definition per se for youth, I struggle to accept arguments for the retirement of youth as a sociological concept (as in Jeffs & Smith, 1999; also Postman, 1994), for it is my contention that if I can see it, feel it, act upon it, I must be able to know it, youth must be something real!

Judith Bessant’s (2001) discussion on her observations of sociologists Chamberlain and MacKenzie (1998), who encountered a challenge similar to mine, that of adequately describing
and measuring youth homelessness, another abstract social event, provides helpful insight to my own discussion here. She offers

... we should not expect to encounter a simple empirical exercise of describing or measuring something that exists (like the number of marbles in a bag). Ideas and social experiences like poverty, homelessness and unemployment are complex, multi-faceted and do not exist in the same ways that, for example, a marble or bag of marbles exists. Instead, they depend on social definitions that there may be little or no consensus on (p. 37)

Later, Bessant goes on to cite Chamberlain and MacKenzie’s acknowledgement that social events often depend on “perceptions.” These perceptions are ultimately an “extreme form of relativism,” and that this relativism can

...be overcome theoretically once it is recognized that [social events] are socially constructed, cultural concepts that only make sense in a particular community at a given historical period... it is a cultural construct, but this does not mean that ‘homelessness’ is just a matter of opinion, or that all definitions are arbitrary (p. 16-21; emphasis in original).

Similarly, I notice Peter Kelly (2006) somewhat inadvertently differentiates between youth as a population and youth as a concept (p. 17), which I compare to Johanna Wyn and Rob White’s (2000) distinction between adolescents/adolescence. Elsewhere, Wyn and White (1997) compare the implications of what they refer to as a categorical approach of youth against those of a theory of youth as a relational concept, suggesting youth is “a social process in which the meaning and experience of becoming an adult is socially-mediated” (p. 4).

It is ironic yet productive to reimagine youth not only in addition to adult, but in relation to—and more specifically, in contrast with—adulthood. Blatterer (2007) notices, “Even when sociologists are explicitly concerned with childhood, adolescence, youth or old age, adulthood is
always present as a point of reference” (p. 773), representing an unspoken, normative standard of “meaningful achievement” (p. 776), that is, “full personhood” (p. 778), thereby constructing youth, as something fundamentally non-adult, also therefore inevitably inadequate, ultimately deviant, thus indefinitely problematic.

Hockey and James (1993) connect notions of personhood to the unequal social distribution of power and privilege

. . . [the] passage through the life course . . . involves the wielding and attribution of personhood at different times and . . . power is asymmetrically wielded as individuals move between marginal and central social positions, between different conceptions of personhood. Parents, for example, are persons in a way which small children are not; adults are persons in ways that ‘the elderly’ no longer are. And in each relationship, power is unevenly exercised (in Blatterer, 2007, pp. 779-780).

Reimagining youth and truth

Building on this, I think with Bourdieu’s theory of practice to reimagine youth as doxa, and also, separately and together (as my reader will find), youth as field. While imagining youth as doxa is indicative of an unconscious contest over social order (Swartz, 1997, p. 125) via “schemes of thought and perception” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164), an exploration of youth as field relates the stakes (and what is at stake) to a broader social structure (Swartz, 1997, p. 292), to explore how notions of youth, adulthood, personhood position players, writes the rules, and draws boundaries within which the game is played, to map patterns and strategies of truth-telling, symbolic power, violence, domination. Through all this commotion, I show how the underlying politics of youth gets lost in the everyday, for youth as truth corresponds to the ways the world is organised through social events, institutions and relations, just as the same are structured by the version of youth known as truth, thereby trapping well-meaning individuals in a contest for/against youth. I
argue against Grossberg’s (2001) seemingly accurate observation that young people are “denied any significant place within the collective geography of life” (p. 113); on the contrary, youth and young people are assigned a very specific location in social space. In this way, youth presents a viable—and intriguing—sociological construct for inquiry and analysis of the aforementioned dilemma posed by at-risk youth intervention programs.

Thinking with Bourdieu about youth as doxa and field, I retell the history of youth (by history, I mean not a chronological account of events, but merely a framework of “practical and theoretical events”) (Lesko, 1996, p. 140). This is tricky, since, as doxa and field would suggest, there really is no singular history of youth; like all other stories, the history of youth (however imagined) is merely an interpretation of events (who, what, where, when, why, how) dependent on the context in which the story is told (who, what, where…)—which is exactly the point I wish this chapter to make. The world looks very differently upon reflecting on the world through a lens that renders the unthinkable (What if young people occupied a social position equal to that of adults?)—thinkable. The result is an alternate history of youth, testified according to a perspective that has until now remained silent in most other sociologies of youth and youth work literature, and (to foreshadow Chapters Three and Four), also (at least one to likely most) at-risk youth intervention programs. In exploring this alternate history, I reimagine youth as a struggle.

To think with Bourdieu’s concept of doxa, I argue knowledge of youth as a “goes without saying because it comes without saying” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 167), always implicitly learned in the field, yet rarely spoken by the field. Neither this thesis nor the news article I use to guide my discussion, “What a 9 year old thinks,” puts forth any explicit definition of youth (or childhood or girlhood). While I insist my own failure to is in fact an exclusion—since the purpose of this
paper is to trouble the (im)possibility of any neat definition of the word—I suggest the absence of definition in the article is more likely an omission—inadvertent, impulsive, unconscious. The article authors, as well as the experts on whose testimony the article depends, the girls included in the discussion groups, and presumably, the intended audience, speak of youth as effortlessly as it arises in popular discussion. As a “stable, descriptive classification” (Tait, 1993, p. 41), youth is implicit, straightforward and self-explanatory, even obvious, “objectively real” (Webb et al., 2002, p. 96), unconditional and uncomplicated, thus natural, legitimate—ultimately “unaware of the very question of legitimacy” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168).

Except, to suggest youth is doxa is to suggest that the ways it is constructed as common sense à la “What a 9 year old thinks,” is nothing less than an arbitrary construction of reality. “Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness,” writes Bourdieu (1977, p. 164). When I reflect on age as a way to classify bodies, I think, for example, about how time is (if you will) a transitive noun; that is, its meaning always must depend on its relationship to some other direct event, since “There is no such thing as time-in-itself” (Lesko, 2001, p. 131). Age, therefore, is merely an “embedding/accumulation of time within the body” (Tait, 1993, p. 46), a normative patterning of social events according to humans’ organisation of time, as expressed through language, divided into notions of past, present, and future; conceived as states of becoming, being, and having been; named, young and old, youth and adult. Likewise, Bourdieu challenges biological definitions of age classifications, insisting divisions are “constituted not biologically (like the physical signs of ageing) but socially, and marked by the cosmetics and clothing, decoration, ornaments, and emblems, the token which express and underline the uses of the body that are legitimately associated with each socially defined age” (1977, p. 165). In this way,
Durkheim (1912) (ironically, an individual who himself expressed a fear of, hostility towards young people) would suggest the physicality of youth is arbitrary, meaningful only as it displaces something more invisible:

It is true that since collective sentiments can become conscious of themselves only by fixing themselves upon external objects, they have not been able to take form without adopting some of their characteristics from other things: they have thus acquired a sort of physical nature; in this way they have come to mix themselves with the life of the material world, and then have considered themselves capable of explaining what passes there (p. 91).

Like this, youth as doxa represents the collective “standards against which everything else is to be valued and judged” (in Deer, 2008, p. 205), including systems of categorisation, symbols, narratives, expectations, anticipations, traditions. Kelly (2003) describes the concept of youth as a set of “habitual readings” (p. 167), which Bourdieu calls “unconscious inclusion,” for the way a whole world-view is reduced to the name of common sense or something like it (cited in Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 512). As Lesko (2001) explains, “When I offer ‘Nathalie is 12’ or ‘Luis is 15,’ these statements call forth volumes of information and references... Age is a shorthand, a code that evokes what amounts to an ‘epidemic of signification’” (p. 4). Social institutions function according to and in support of the same classifications, as in their determinations of the appropriate “school starting age, school leaving age, age at which income support is payable, the age of citizenship, retirement age” (Kelly, 2003, p. 173). What is more, Bourdieu (1993) observes how

the closer [one is] to the pole of power, the more these ‘young men’ take on the attributes of the adult, the old man, the noble, the notable, etc. As one moves from the intellectuals to the managing director, so everything that gives a ‘young’ look—long hair, jeans, etc.—disappears (p. 95).
Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, doxa both contributes to and culminates in a “closed feedback loop” (Holton, 2000, p. 89); that is, “the near perfect correspondence between the social structures and mental structures, between the objective order and the subjective organizing principles” (Deer, 2008, p. 121). In “What a 9 year old thinks,” an expert explains, “it’s terrifying because the way girls get defined within this context is as consumers...” Skip to the very next paragraph, the article claims: “What can’t be ignored, however, is that girls like to shop.” The misrecognition of this perfect contradiction is equally amusing and distressing for the same reasons. In this practical example, the arbitrariness of girlhood is easily rationalized, its arbitrariness excused just the same, mediated by “what is” (Deer, 2008, p. 123), reason and reality cited as proof (Watts, cited in Kelly, 2000b, p. 468), so that the image of girl-as-consumer is accepted, reaffirmed, even strengthened by the field, even in the midst of challenge and disruption. Though I mention only one example, this curious trend transpires on many occasions throughout the article and throughout youth studies literature, the gaps always filled over by any given research experiment, an expert or institution. Discussions of youth seem to “always falls back on the authority of common sense” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52) for common sense is “seductive to those not willing to think too hard” (Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 7). In this way, Giroux (1999) insists, “pedagogy works through its own cultural practices in order to legitimate its own motivating questions, secure particular modes of authority, and privilege particular ‘institutional frameworks and disciplinary rules” (p. 1).

The greatest way this is accomplished is that, “For Bourdieu, the ‘doxic attitude’ means bodily and unconscious submission to conditions that are in fact quite arbitrary and contingent” (Webb et al., 2002, p. xi; emphasis added); doxa is the internalisation of the rules of the game into individual cognitive selves (Swartz, 1997, p. 86). In this way, the meanings of the world
inevitably evoke for social beings any range of emotion (from delight and anticipation, to disappointment, fear, anger) (Grossberg, 2001, p. 127). Lesko (1999) discusses (indirectly) how doxa shapes doxa; for example, the implication that young people are apparently naturally peer-oriented is more likely a result of traditional institutional arrangements, which promote young people as peer-oriented by consistently placing young people in close proximity to each other (p. 154). This common consciousness speaks to Mannheim’s work on the ways human generations come to represent political generations (in Kohli, 1996); sheds light on Grossberg’s (2001) tripping over his own theory for the Baby Boomers’ generation as representing a numerical majority over Generation X (rather than dominant/dominated positions in the field). “The agent engaged in practice knows the world... too well, without objectifying distance, takes it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it, bound up with it; he inhabits it like a garments... he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of the habitus” (Bourdieu, 2000, cited in Webb et al., 2002, p. 25).

It follows then, that Gordon Tait (1993) imagines youth as doxa, but also youth as habitus, a learned way of being, a “matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in Tait, 1993), and how collective understanding of youth creates, limits, shapes individual agency for all, not just young people. Bourdieu (1977) writes, that “nothing seems more ineffable... and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy” (cited in Tait, 1993, p. 48). Bourdieu describes individuals’ unconscious (that is, “never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of the habitus”) (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in Webb et al., 2002, p. 16) as “tendentious” (in Webb et al., 2002, p. 16), for the way individual judgment is structured
by doxa through individuals’ primary senses (including taste, smell, sight) (see Holton, 2000, p. 88). Lubeck and Garrett (1990) (perhaps over-)simplify this process as “Ideology thus becomes reality” (p. 338), and so “our psychology confirms our sociology” (Spacks, 1981, cited in Lesko, 1996, p. 149). Youth as doxa is significant then, for “A focus on the paradox of youth identifies action, choice, and a real sense of shaping futures, at the same time directing attention to the very real constraints on young people’s lives” (Wyn & White, 2000, p. 178). The dilemma is, of course, “for most young people, they know of no other way of relating to these processes” (Wyn & White, 2000, p. 166)—of course, the same goes for adults.

Bourdieu (1991) recognises the commonsense world as having both an implicit dimension as well as an explicit dimension (though I hesitate to discuss doxa as anything explicit, and acknowledge the complicated relationships that exist in the space between). “The explicit [dimension] includes the articulation of this consensus in the public act of naming the world” (in Holton, 2000, p. 89). Deer (2008) shows how language, as a tool of field, enables, promotes misrecognition, precludes reflection, “keeping numerous dynamics and relations unthinkable” (Lesko, 2001, p. 6), thereby contributing to the maintenance and reproduction of doxa (p. 122). For example, teenage pregnancy is understood as something different than the pregnancy of a middle-aged mother, youth crime is apparently more alarming than crime committed by adult bodies. “Attaching ‘teenage’ or ‘teen’ to anything is virtually synonymous with triviality,” says Jeffs and Smith (1999, ‘Youth’ section, para. 4). These authors also discuss the ways in which different labels for young people are applied to different situations to achieve different effects: psychologists most commonly refer to young people as ‘adolescents’ (following Stanley G. Hall); marketing professionals favour ‘teenagers’ in discussing trends in consumption; politicians speak of ‘youth’ (‘Youth’ section, para. 2). Bourdieu (1990) claims
“words to a great extent make things” (p. 54). These implicit and explicit dimensions of common sense come together so that

All agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in the most varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest)... or, in another dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, singular, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine)... is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order (Bourdieu, 1984, in Swartz, 1997, pp. 84-85).


Doxa marks—limits—“the space of social possible” (Bourdieu, cited in Holton, 2000, p. 89); that is, it not only assigns the taken for granted, it also draws boundaries to guard “the thinkable from the unthinkable” (Webb et al., 200, p. 119). Giroux (1994) discusses how the doxic attitude of youth functions in dominant media to not only prescribe very specific ways of understanding and talking about youth and young people, but also serves to distract attention from the incompleteness of those stories, “what the dominant media do not talk about.”

For instance, to talk about black crime without mentioning that the unemployment rate for black youth exceeds 40 per cent in many urban cities [...] Or to talk about apathy among white youth without analyzing the junk culture, poverty, social disenfranchisement, drugs, lack of educational opportunity, and commodification that shape daily life (Mass Culture and the Representation of Youth(s) section, para. 2).

Likewise, doxa determines the "sense of one's place," and alternatively, notions of “this is not for us" (“ce n’est pas pour nous). Judith Bessant (2003) shows how organized youth
participation in government decision-making processes appears democratic, but without challenging the doxic truths about youth and young people and adults/hood in the field, it is likely that the voice of youth, as a social status of disadvantage and disempowerment, will remain unheard. Bourdieu (1993) observes, “It seems that one of the most powerful effects of the situation of adolescents derives from this kind of separate existence, which puts them socially out of play” (p. 96). It follows, Sharland (2002) notices a “growing separation of children’s from adult services, with young people falling (in)conveniently between” (p. 248).

As autonomous yet over-lapping and intersecting fields of power, a number of social institutions are in fact “silent partners” in the construction of youth as doxa and the reproduction of youth as field. I think about education (age-graded schooling) and economy (work), politics (those arbitrary ages of majority) (that in itself a curious term!), law (to contrast the ideologies of youth court to that of adults), media (imagery, marketing, the Internet), to name a few examples. Thinking about youth as doxa constructed among the/se field/s, it is no coincidence that the great majority of youth research has economic interests, nor the shift in youth studies from a focus predominantly on work and (un)employment and crime in the early 1990’s, to leisure and consumption since the new millennium (in Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 11). “In a society that measures its success and failure solely through the economic lens of the Gross National Product (GNP), it becomes difficult to define youth outside of market principles determined largely by criteria such as the rate of market growth and the accumulation of capital” (Giroux, 2009, para. 2). It follows that youth becomes an issue every election time, waxing and waning as social priorities materialize and dissipate (Gauthier & Pacom, 2001, p. 91). The ‘at risk’ youth intervention program in which I am interested receives their greatest funding from the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (newly created in 2003) (see
http://www.children.gov.on.ca), and is also affiliated with the Ministry of the Attorney General, and two school boards. The shift from the Youth Offenders Act of 1984 to the Youth Criminal Justice Act, 2003, both of which were criticised as too harsh/lenient on young people, suggests “youth justice reform is also clearly driven by assessments of what is electorally popular” (Muncie, 2006, p. 778). Governmental policies which rely on (abuse?) psychology and statistics research (Bessant, 2001, p. 36; Muncie, 2001, p. 778) reaffirm the need for policy, which is ultimately the legitimisation of adult control over youth, and reproduce the power imbalance between these two groups (Wyn & White, 1997). Reflecting on the many bidirectional relationships between doxa and the field suggests government is as much formal policy as it is ideology (Côté & Allahar, 2006, p. 9). For young people, Bourdieu explains, “Symbolic domination... is something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult” (cited in Schubert, 2008, p. 195). This is how field works with doxa in this annoying, backwards-forwards, obvious/invisible, complicated (to say the very least) kind of way.

Conclusion

Deer (2008) explains then, how “doxa allows the socially arbitrary nature of power relations (e.g. classifications, values, categorizations and so on) that have produced the doxa itself to continue to be misrecognised and as such to be reproduced in a self-reinforcing manner” (p. 121) in the field, and among overlapping, mutually-reinforcing fields of power, and thus reproduce both doxa and the field. In this way, “the order of the world as we find it, with its one-way streets and its no entry signs, whether literal or figurative, its obligations and its penalties, is broadly respected; [and] ...the established order, with its relations of domination... perpetuates
itself so easily” (Bourdieu, 2000, cited in Webb et al., 2002, p. 96). Youth as doxa subtly “[creeps] into everyday life” (Muncie, 2006, pp. 785-786), so that domination requires little to no action (Grenfell, 2008, p. 166). By recognizing and critically reflecting on the tendency for scholars and educators, youth workers and policy makers alike, even parents, community members, young people themselves, to trip over and get caught up in the tensions of youth.
In Chapter Two, I challenged the notion of youth as truth, a simple, two-dimensional empirical category, something natural, neutral. Instead, I discussed the possibility of youth, firstly, as doxa: something dynamic, complex, messy; an implicitly learned, pre-reflective truth; a symbolic, historical, embodied concept; and also youth as field, a three-dimensional social relationship, a game, a struggle. Here now in Chapter Three, I locate youth, “imagined as both the cause and solution to social problems” (Bessant, 2003, p. 91), in relation to “the new power game of risk” (Beck, 1999, p. 632, emphasis in original), an intersecting and overlapping field—and a recently-emerged social, political, ideological doxic phenomenon in itself—to explore how “...the means used to discover, verify and manage risk to social order have always been a deeply political and moral process” (Bessant, 2001, p. 33). In mapping what Ulrich Beck (1986/1992, 1999) refers to as the (structured and structuring) “relations of definition” of risk, I show “how risk discourses emerge as a means for rendering reality knowable—a technique that facilitates the management of individual biographies in institutionally structured risk environments” (Kelly, 2007, p. 39). In particular, I argue with Kelly (2006) that “The discourses that construct youth at-risk reveal the truths about whom we should, as adults, become” (p. 17). “In this context, doxa takes the form of symbolic power” (Deer, 2008, p. 121); symbolic power translates to symbolic violence.

Central to this Chapter is “the paradoxical nature of the way ‘youth’ are imagined” (Bessant, 2003, p. 91), simultaneously representing yesterday’s pride/mistake, today’s gift/problem, also tomorrow’s hope/risk. In this way, “Talk about adolescents—their problems, characteristics, and needs—is a central arena for talking about social expectations for productive, rational, independent adults” (Lesko, 1996, p. 142). Thus, to approach the problematic of youth
as doxa and field from an alternate direction, that is, to imagine at-risk youth as a sort of anti-truth of youth, if you will, “Youth at-risk is one space in which this form of personhood might be illuminated and re-imagined” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18). Lesko (1996) quotes G. Stanley Hall (the discoverer of youth, if my reader will recall), who suggested, “There is really no clue by which we can thread our way through all the mazes of culture and the distractions of modern life save by knowing the true nature and needs of childhood and adolescence… Other oracles may grow dim, but this one will never fail” (p. 139)—interesting, I notice, how he and I seem to ask the same questions, but come to make very different connections.

**Enter: risk**

I depart from Swadener’s (1995) broad argument that “Questions such as how problems are defined, under what circumstances particular ‘vulnerabilities’ are problematic, and matters of ‘degree’ to which potential or real problems put children ‘at risk’ all deserve further reflection and critique” (p. 25). More specifically, I make use of Ulrich Beck’s (1998) guide to explore the “relations of definition” of risk, the “legal, epistemological and cultural matrix in which risk politics is conducted” (p. 18). Beck divides these relations into four sections: Firstly, who exactly determines what is risk and what is at stake; and, alternatively, whose voice is not heard? Secondly, what knowledge exists as proof of risk?; and third, closely related, what knowledge counts as proof of risk? Finally, who determines un/acceptable ways of avoiding, regulating, compensating risk and the danger (Beck, 1998, p. 18)? This macro-level critical perspective on risk serves to “construct a better developed public sphere in which the crucial questions of value that underpin risk conflicts can be debated and judged” (Beck, 1999, p. 632).
Placier (1996) suggests, “To fully understand the popularity of a label, one must understand its historical and cultural context” (p. 241), and, indeed, the concept of risk is not new (Franklin, 1998, p. 1). A brief, simplistic history of risk: At least one author, Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, recognised risk as a meaningful social concept (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 101) as early as the 1960’s, tracing the evolution of risk from “older categories such as sin, danger, cleanliness, purity and pollution” (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 2); later, risk came to measure an “unforeseeable foreseeable,” statistical likelihoods as calculated by actuaries (that is, risk professionals), as in the case of insurance policies (Beck, 1998, p. 12); and most recently, Ulrich Beck (1986/1992) has adopted the term to theorise the “Risk society,” a social model used somewhat interchangeably with other expressions of recent social change, late modernity, post-modernity, industrial civilization, globalisation, the “global age,” (Beck, 1999, p. 631).

So while the concept of risk may not necessarily be new, the new nature of risk presents “a new model for understanding our times” (Beck, 1998, p. 20) and the ways youth fit in. Central to Beck’s theory of “Risk Society” is an emphasis on the increasing interest (obsession) with science and technology, experts, choice, individualization, the future, so that “Events that do not exist (yet) strongly influence [decisions made in the present]... risks are a kind of virtual, yet real, reality” (Ewald, in Beck, 1998, p. 11). The Risk Society is not more dangerous than previous time periods (Giddens, 1998, p. 27); rather, this new notion of “Risk is about the active assessment of future hazards” (Giddens & Pierson, 1998, p. 101, emphasis added) and the ways risk functions.

“We no longer tolerate the fairy tale of unforeseeable consequences. The stork does not bring consequences. They are made,” insists Beck (in Woollacott, 1998, p. 120). Time and space
are moreover “theorized as distinct and mutually independent categories of strategy and action (Bauman, 2001, p. 589), and the increasing focus on individualization is in fact, more specifically, institutionalized individualism—that is, immediately related to the predetermined social structure and the welfare state. Holton (2000) suggests, “A general but fundamental agreement thus exists within a community on the range of desirable goals and the strategies available to achieve them, and on the range of undesirable outcomes and the strategies available to avoid them” (p. 89) (therefore inevitably compromising the possibility of rational choice). In this way, the “globality of risk” is not the same as a global equality of risk (Beck, 1999, p. 633).

Beck (1998) explains

> In terms of social politics, the ecological crisis involves a systematic violation, or crisis, of basic rights, and the long-term impact of this weakening of society can scarcely be overestimated. For dangers are being produced by industry, externalised by economics, individualised by the legal system, legitimised by the sciences and made to appear harmless by politics (p. 16).

Grenfell and James (2004) see how “These developments can be understood as the exerting of influence to change a field of knowledge by the imposition of definitions of legitimacy and the re-grounding of institutional relations, and thus structures” (p. 513, emphasis in original). Risk then presents a “major force of political mobilization,” an “(institutionalized) attempt, a cognitive map, to colonize the future” (Beck, 1999, p. 632), something personal, also something social (Giddens, 1998, p. 28).

The emergence of the Risk Society, in particular, has significant consequences for youth and young people especially, already disadvantaged and disempowered (as I argued in Chapter Two). In times of moral panic (Schissel, 1997, p. 10), as the Risk Society could certainly be considered, and the subsequent reorganization of socio-political structures, groups, and
individuals (Grossberg, 2001, p. 132), collective conversation always seems to lead back to a
discussion of youth. Indeed, the most commonly identified (feared) risks (for example, the
disappearance of (nuclear) family values, the increasingly narrow labour market and sweeping
un(der)employment rates, “me-first culture,” the global warming crisis, technological takings-
over) implicate youth and/or young people in one way or another (in Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 8).

**Locating youth and/at-risk**

In 1983, the American National Commission on Excellence in Education published a
report that presented impressive statistics to argue that the quality of the American education
system was deteriorating to the point at which, they claimed, American students would no longer
be able to compete in the global market for jobs, business and industry. The report, entitled *A Nation at risk: The Imperative for educational reform*, reasoned, where “America's position in
the world may once have been reasonably secure... It is no longer” (*A Nation at risk* page, The
Risk section, para. 1). Though the subject of the document was schooling, it has been suggested
that this document is perhaps responsible for the introduction of the notion of at-riskness to
greater educational lexicon (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 323) since the early 1990’s
(Placier, 1996, p. 253). Placier (1996) adds, “…the label given to a situation matters because it
determines ways of thinking and behaving in that situation” (p. 242).

Now, risk, as applied to youth, functions as a metaphor, by invoking principles of
statistical likelihoods and biomedical sciences (epidemiology, for example, the study of disease
transmission and control) (Placier, 1996, p. 253) in order to form a convenient comparison to
construct and communicate formerly-unknown meanings of the social lives of young people (see
“The category of ‘youth at-risk’ now enjoys a common sense status in the minds of many social scientists, policy makers, and practitioners” (p. 31; emphasis added). For examples, in a recent Toronto District School Board report (2008), “The term ‘at-risk students’ typically refers to students who are at risk of not experiencing success at school” (p. 5.1) (my Grade Eight teacher would lament this defining a word by itself!); and the prologue to English’s (1988) text, The at-risk student, insists, “occasionally it is necessary to explain why a book has been written. This one requires no such justification” (in Kelly, 2007, p. 41). In her analysis of the use of at-riskness in Australian youth policy and publications, te Riele (2006) concludes the term is used in a self-explanatory manner, as if “the phrase ‘youth at risk’ has taken on a life of its own” (p. 130).

Indeed, estimates of the category of at-risk youth curiously vary depending on its definition: according to the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, more than one in four (27.6%) Canadians under age 11 are at-risk; the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development estimate 15-30% of children and youth in its member countries are at-risk; Côté and Allahar (1994) argue that all children can be considered at-risk for something, sometimes (three examples cited in Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, pp. 323-325). At-riskness is taken up by sociology, social work, psychology, education, economics, medicine... In the disciplines of sociology and education alone, the term is used to refer to a vast range of social events, from school failure and drop out, to crime, drug use, homelessness, pregnancy… For each of those, at-riskness is predicted according to an even wider range of variables including any combination of, for example, poverty, ethnic minority and/or immigrant status, first language, school attendance/truancy, achievement/failure, familial dys/function, family/household structure (ie. single parent), transience, geography (ie. urban, suburban, rural),
criminal behaviour, substance abuse.... Certainly, contrary to its frequent, confident usage, there is no consensus on a universal definition for at-riskness (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; te Riele, 2006), since the term is derived always in different circumstances, according to varying factors, variables, predicting varying outcomes in each of the many contexts it appears.

Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) explain, “The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development designates children and youth ‘at-risk’ if they are failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence are unlikely to be able to make a full contribution to active society” (p. 322). This particular statement reflects a few constructed truths of “riskfactorology” (Wishart et al., 2006, p. 292), especially relevant to an investigation of at-risk youth intervention programs: firstly, that talk about at-risk youth is most often more particularly talk about marginalised bodies (Schissel, 1997, p. 10); secondly, that it is possible to predict individual futures based on current conditions; and third, that there is an obvious, easily-accessible ideal adult future (Kelly, 2007, p. 42). In this way, notions of at-riskness “inevitably involve political, ethical, and moral judgment by some in relation to others” (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 2).

Judith Bessant (2001) insists, “the proposition that one can use aggregate data about large numbers of people and then apply that data or any finding from it to a particular person and from there go on to argue that the individual is ‘at risk’ involves being quite unempirical” (p. 36).

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4 In earlier work, I punctuated “at-risk” as such to express my uneasiness with using a term I argued was problematic (vague, context-specific, ultimately violent). Though the term (obviously) still causes some discomfort, (today) I feel the extra punctuation tends to trivialise the implications of at-riskness, conveying some sense of frivolity rather than acknowledging at-riskness as representing a very real idea, a concept, a doxic truth.
Further, false positives and false negatives abound. That is, “Not all members of minority groups or individuals in positions designated ‘at-risk’ will experience... negative outcomes. Even for those not so designated, childhood and adolescence are characterized by various passages in which many individuals may find themselves in risky circumstances” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 327).

Further, Tidwell and Corona Garrett (1994) notice how “current usage [of the term] drops the element of prediction the words at risk literally imply” (cited in Schonert, 2000, p. 7), appearing instead to represent statistically significant, cause-and-effect relationships (Kelly, 2000b, p. 468). Thus, uncertainties become probabilities (Bessant, 2001, p. 33), rendering knowable individual futures (Kelly, 2007). Of course, those young people deemed at-risk are held personally responsible (to themselves and others) to secure that ideal adult future (Kelly, 2007, p. 45); their failure to do so presents evidence of their own inability or unwillingness, rather than the failure of some—but importantly, not all—institutions to provide access to opportunities and resources that make possible that ideal adult future (Wishart et al., 2006).

“[T]he primary business of the sociology of risk appears to involve... dividing practices that distinguish between those who are at risk from certain ‘problems’ and those who are not,” says Bessant (2001, p. 32). Likewise, in Douglas’ early work on risk, she observed how risk functioned as a boundary between in/out groups (in Sharland, 2002, p. 258). Statistical analysis of mean, median, mode, and the like are determined in relation to that which is deemed “normal” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331-332), inevitably to determine that which is different (therefore problematic) (Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997, p. 103). Kelly (2007) discusses the extensive history of Othering processes inherent in at-riskness (p. 43), as in the creation of “a false
distinction between a supposed problematic minority versus a ‘normal’ majority’ (te Riele, 2006, abstract). While the so-called normals can be assumed members of dominant groups, others’ difference is communicated as something unknown, undesirable (Kelly, 2000b, p. 473; Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 328)—risky.

The dividing practices of at-riskness operate on at least two levels. The first of these functions to distinguish between adults and young people, the implication being that while youth is problematic, adulthood is not (Jeffs & Smith, 1999, Perceptions of youth and adulthood section, para. 2). Consider the absence of a comparable social category of at-risk adults. A simple experiment using Google search engine to produce a cross section of “at-risk adults” in popular online discussion returns only 3% of the amount of results for “at-risk youth,” and the majority of matches for “at-risk adults” appear to refer to disabled adults in particular, or elderly adults needing constant care. The implication is that adults do not experience such struggles as poverty, substance abuse, family dysfunction, etc., those variables that evidently put young people at risk. Daytime and reality television, though not necessarily a reliable source, certainly indicates otherwise; but even adults with substance abuse issues, for example, are not discussed in relation to risk per se, as are young people. Similarly, notions of at-riskness fill litter academic research, educational policies, government and social organisations mission statements—written exclusively by adults—yet not a single one of the nineteen so-called at risk ninth- and tenth-grade students with whom Beth C. Rubin (2003) met in a California high school identified themselves as being at risk, or even significantly different from their not at risk peers (p. 201). Likewise, Wishart et. al. (2009) notice how the coding of some young people as at-risk results in referring to and treating some students as “its” (p. 299). In this way, Bessant (2001) explains how at-riskness ensures the continued marginalisation of young people.
Too much risk-based research relies on normative assumptions about the social and economic dependence of young people which when given expression and legitimacy through the research findings reinforce discourses about ‘youth’ as dependent. Much of this work tends to rest on assumptions about ‘youth’ as dependent and in need of close supervision. Risk-based research authorizes researchers as expert speakers about homeless youth at the same time as it delegitimates young people as speakers and active subjects capable of framing the problem in different ways (p. 41).

As Placier (1996) suggests, “the labeller holds the power to define the labeller-labelled relationship” (p. 242).

Secondly, the sorting and selection of at-risk youth more often than not results in isolating poor and minority children from those more privileged (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 327). Since general demographic patterns do in fact exist among most measures of at-riskness (since events commonly considered to be factors of risk, like poverty, family structure, education, employment are not equally distributed), at-riskness often functions as a euphemism for racism, classism, sexism, ableism, ageism (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331). Much research on at-riskness features a “familiar analysis of family breakdown, poor parental control, failing child rearing practices and a dependency culture” (Muncie, 2006, p. 781), the consistence and reliability of which implies these are the most/only likely associated variables. Rose (1990) suggests, “normality is not an observation but a valuation” (cited in Tait, 1993, p. 41), ignorant of historical and structural forces (te Riele, 2006, p. 132).

Rather, misleading correlation of at-riskness and dimensions of minority identity (race, class, gender, age) imply a biological link. Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) criticize media dependency on scientific experts and biological language in reporting on marginalized youth for creating and supporting a physical explanation of social issues (p. 328). Discussion of age,
hormones, brain development, or other similar, commonly mentioned, however bogus variables of at-riskness decontextualises at-riskness as a social condition and locates the problem in the individual (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 329), much like stigma of disease and disability (Placier, 1996, p. 260). Investigating a recent social phenomenon of gun violence in schools, Watts and Erevelles (2004) found students who deviate from the norm are considered to have “a propensity for school violence” and/or some emotional disturbance (p. 273)—a conclusion I imagine as appearing in a medical journal (like, if you will, “Effective methods for clinical treatment of at-riskness in Canadian youth”). Society’s never-ending “need to correct” (cited in Kelly, 2007, p. 43) materialises as programs for early diagnosis, prevention, intervention, treatment, and cure for the apparent problem posed by at-risk youth; and legitimises these measures as an appropriate and necessary response to the perceived risk (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 322). Spencer and Foster (2010) refer to at-riskness as something “sticky;” that is, difficult to shake, escape once applied.

Gordon Tait (1995) insists that at-riskness is an especially effective label for youth, since its “calculability, specificity and versatility” can be manipulated to support any number of social, educational, economic, political goals (p. 133), including the legitimization of heightened control over those youth at-risk. “[T]he reach of risk is endless,” he writes, “Nothing remains outside its territory, and hence nothing remains beyond governmental intervention” (p. 128). “My point is not that everything is bad,” says Michel Foucault (1983, cited in Kelly, 2000b, p. 469), “but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do.” So while youth are subject to government and similar adult control, the control of specifically at-risk youth is exaggerated—by virtue of this concept of at-riskness—in order that they may be diagnosed, treated, and ultimately ‘cured’ (if you will) from
their condition, from a state of dysfunction to the “other side,” essentially that of dominant cultural conformity. Lubeck and Garrett (1990) insist the definition alone of risk suggests its own solution (p. 328).

The apparent evidence of emerging and/or greater risks posed by youth (for example, reportedly rising rates of girl violence, an increasing awareness of drug use among high school students, the mounting frequency of school shootings in the Greater Toronto Area) serves as justification for the increased control of youth by adults. Jeffs and Smith (1999) associate notions of “youth” synonymously with notions of control and management of young people’s bodies by adults (The counter-case section, para. 4), or at least adult-led policy and practice. If, as Rose suggests, youth is in fact “the most intensively governed sector of personal existence” (cited in Muncie, 2006, p. 772), which is, of course, an argument central to this thesis, those young people deemed at-risk are even more susceptible to government surveillance and control. In fact, I argue that recent Bills 242, the Full-Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010, which amends provisions of the Education Act, and also Bill 52, Education Statute Law Amendment Act, Learning to Age 18, 2006 were not necessarily intended for all students from all families, but rather, designed to legitimate greater institutionalisation of already marginalised students and families, like many of those from low socioeconomic status (“priority”) neighbourhoods. Ontario’s Ministry of Children and Youth Services, formed in 2003, means to bring together programs from the Ministries of Community and Social Services and Education to “make it easier for families to access the services they need at all stages of a child's development,/ and help youth become productive adults” (2010, About the ministry page, para. 1), ultimately based on a general mistrust of and subsequently greater institutionalisation over (especially already marginalised) young people. Further, says Kelly (2003), “There also exists a general concern for
any youth activity that gives the appearance of being beyond the management or surveillance capacities of various agencies. These concerns are evidenced in the countless research projects and reports that have as their aim *better* understandings of all aspects of young people’s lives” (p. 169). As youth as a concept becomes more and more politicised, youth as a population are susceptible to greater institutional care and management.

**At-risk youth intervention programs**

Historically, the government has always been relied upon to provide “compensatory education” for those children deemed unproductive, uncivilized, unfit, risky. Formal kindergarten classes were first designed and introduced in hopes that children would be properly raised beginning as soon as possible by a positive adult role model, therefore taught to become valuable, contributing citizens (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). Indeed, the more things change, the more they stay the same, for “the solution [to at-riskness also] has been sought in more education” (te Riele, 2006, p. 139).

Much recent literature (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001; Swadener, 1995) criticises current models of at-risk youth intervention programs as representing the same old-fashioned authoritarian child-saving strategies, identifying many affinities between the two eras of practice. “Despite definition and re-definition and despite continuing contestation over meaning, one thing has remained constant: the belief that some parents have failed their children and that philanthropists/professionals must come to the rescue” (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 338). In a fairly recent government news release on the unveiling of a Vancouver at-risk youth intervention pilot program, the provincial legislative representative states, “It’s important to work together *to protect* the most vulnerable children and youth” (in Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2008, p. 1; emphasis added). The stability of youth as doxa means that in
spite of new knowledge production, much educational practice continues based on history, tradition, and convenience (Cooper, Levin & Campbell, 2009, p. 169).

Alternately, the context made possible by the newest nature of risk has ushered in to some extent a new era of at-risk youth intervention programs. In this Risk Society, youth is known and problematised in new ways, thus addressed and resolved in new ways; namely, the “development of multifactoral assessments of types, degrees and inventories of risk said to produce professionals with the means to predict and calibrate the likelihood of transgressive, risky or otherwise problem behaviour” (Bessant, 2003, p. 88). Greater pursuit of knowledge, greater access to information and technology means prevention and early intervention take on new meaning. Societal “preoccupations with causality” (Bessant, 2001, p. 34) tend to address only specific individual problems—symptoms, if you will—rather than any root cause (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Educational researchers, policy makers, and administrators seem to have become preoccupied with the problem rather than critically reflecting on the real solution (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331). At-risk youth are said

*entitled* to the earliest possible intervention to address that offending behaviour and eliminate its causes... Early and pre-emptive intervention (as distinct from diversion) becomes justified through notions of ‘child protection’ or ‘nipping crime in the bud.’ In this climate it becomes possible to ‘confidently’ claim that ‘it is never too early to intervene’ (Muncie, 2006, p. 781).

A focus on prevention leads researchers to attempt to make predictions regarding which individuals may and may not be most likely at-risk for any given variable, which may “produce rather than ameliorate risk” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331). Funny thing about prevention, Bourdieu (1990) discusses, is how “the logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatizes its victims by imprisoning them in a negative essence”
Further, for all the research and work and focus on prevention and methods to counteract risk factors (i.e., family dysfunction), research on so-called protective factors, i.e., social support, proaction, and liberation (Watts & Erevelles, 2004, p. 272) is scarce.

When Johnson (1997) interviewed school administrators to determine their perceptions of the effectiveness of at-risk youth intervention programs, she found a strong overall belief in the value of prenatal services, early childhood and preschool interventions, parenting skills programs, community recreation programs, and heritage pride activities. The strong inclination for what she classified as early intervention strategies, and particularly family-based prevention programs rather than socially-responsive proaction/reaction to bona fide need (Watts & Erevelles, 2004, p. 272) indicates some belief in predetermination, which in turn serves to “simplify issues of good and bad for public consumption” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 328). Biological and health approaches to at-riskness approach young people’s decision-making skills, for example, as if inhibited by deficient, underdeveloped, or else absent biological neurological, cognitive, intellectual ability. Such biological imagery suggests young people can be simply treated and cured from their current problematic condition of at-riskness, from a state of dysfunction to normalcy, thus also prevents critical reflection of the field.

Tait (1993) explains, “implicit within the structures of the modern family and school are the assumptions that these illnesses can almost always be avoided by acceding to the plethora of governmental practices and interventions designed as promoting the correct training of young people” (p. 47)—which, to read between the lines, implicates notions of choice. The belief that “risk can be prevented by specific therapeutic measures has a powerful ideological impact on public perception and subsequent policy intervention” (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 328).
Social inequality obscures a straightforward conceptualisation of choice; that is, Bourdieu (1976) concludes that “Choice is in most cases determined by real possibilities” (p. 110). “Real possibilities” here refers to the realistic chances of any given event of those who belong to one’s social group, also historical social constructions that individuals learn to be real.

Self-esteem programs in particular reflect a general neo-liberal tendency to “replace more punitive regimes of discipline with risk-based technologies of governance” (Bessant, 2001, p. 40), or normative rather than strictly utilitarian power strategies. Barbara Cruikshank problematises this, for self-esteem education locates the problem as personal; rather, self-esteem is public, “a social relationship and a political obligation” (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 231). She criticises programs that teach self-governance under the guise of self-esteem education, imposing a sort “social vaccine” (cited on p. 232) rather than liberation, an attempt to assimilate an identified problematic minority according to cultural, political ideals of (adult) personhood rather than rectify unjust social conditions. Beck (1999) sees notions of risk as promoting an approach to young people as a “human project” (p. 631), as if personhood is a chore to be completed. In much the same way, mentoring programs, as premised on the idea that “A mentor is a person whose hindsight can become your foresight” (cited in McCluskey, Noller, Lamoureux, & McCluskey, 2004, p. 85), thus ultimately depend upon a power imbalance, where one body is accepted as having more experience, more knowledge, better knowledge, while the other is rendered dependent, inferior than his mentor. Additionally, restorative justice programs fail to challenge risk management strategies; specifically “compulsory [restorative justice] may degenerate into a ceremony of public shaming and degradation” (Muncie, 2006, pp. 779-780).
“‘Empowerment’ and ‘self-esteem’ are almost mandatory in mission statements and grant applications for non-profit agencies,” notes Cruikshank (1996, p. 238)—but what does it mean to be/come “a better person” (see Bessant & Watts, 1998, p. 5)? Westheimer and Kahne (2004) suggest “visions of obedience and patriotism that are often and increasingly associated with this agenda can be at odds with democratic goals. And even the widely accepted goals—fostering honesty, good-neighbourliness, and so on—are not inherently about democracy” (p. 245) At-risk youth intervention, Rose (1990) suggests, amongst other social programs, “[bring] the varied ambitions of political, scientific, philanthropic, and professional authorities into alignment with the ideals and aspirations of individuals, with the selves each of us want to be” (in Cruikshank, 1996, p. 235). In the same way, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) show how seemingly empirical questions—for instance, “Is the program successful?” or their example, “‘Which program better develops citizens?’”—appear straightforward (yes/no, this one/that one) and value-neutral, yet unconsciously “necessarily engages the political views that surround varied conceptions of citizenship, because the question leaves open the definition of a good citizen” (p. 262).

Likewise, the literal evaluation of the ‘effectiveness’ of non-profit organizations, however, (specifically at-risk youth intervention programs) is highly problematic. At-risk youth intervention programs, like most other public policy and practice, have recently seen intensified pressure for “Evidence-based practice” (Cooper et al., 2009); though Lemieux-Charles and Champagne present findings that suggest the use of “Evidence-based practice” does not necessarily lead to improved outcomes (cited on p. 161). “A discourse of ‘what works’,,” explains Muncie (2006), “is deceptively benign, pragmatic, and non-ideological” (p. 778). That is, in the first place, qualitative methods, though potentially more meaningful in terms of recognising social problems and bringing about social change, are overlooked in favour of more
traditional quantitative methods, which, albeit more accessible, less labour-intensive, thus easier, faster, cheaper, are also somewhat superficial, often misleading (Muncie, 2006, p. 778). Bessant (2001) discusses how amusing metaphors (like, “100 grams of prevention is worth a kilo of treatment”) (p. 40), naked statistics, and selective anecdotes oversimplify the problem, practice, and especially solution. The result, as Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) note, is often an idealised, thus impractical imbalance of “short-term therapeutic benefits and potential long-term disadvantages” (p. 331). Nevertheless, a so-called pragmatic approach (Watts & Erevelles, 2004, p. 272), based on demonstrable outcomes and measurable results, and especially prevention, translates in a business context as “cost savings,” therefore “responsible fiscal management” (Bessant, 2001, p. 40).

Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001), in their article entitled “Business of placing Canadian children and youth ‘at-risk,’” refer to the ways at-risk youth intervention programs “affect the life choices and chances for all youth, not simply those designated to be at-risk” (p. 325), arguing the designation of some bodies—but not others—to be “at-risk” serves the interests of some over others. For example, it seems at-risk youth intervention programs serve to legitimate the displacement of nonconforming students from the classroom elsewhere, functioning not only to enable closer surveillance and control of at-risk youth, but also reducing the inconvenience they pose for others who deem their difference to be dangerous. In these ways, at-risk youth intervention programs provide for the interests of the general public, often categorised as taxpayers, the “normal majority,” at the expense of the young people they are designed to benefit. Bourdieu asserted “the non-profit sector functions to legitimate particular economic interests by converting them into forms of symbolic recognitions for the collective good” (cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 91).
So it should be no surprise that this increasing focus on knowledge production and control and prevention means at-risk youth intervention programs who depend on external, often government sponsorship, have very good reasons to participate in the field of competition for recognition and resources. Wishart et al. (2006) and Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) provide instances where so-called “radical” schools—essentially, those classrooms were formerly naturalised power relationships are disrupted, critical reflection is encouraged, tradition is questioned—are denied funds based on their controversial approach to learning and teaching. Thus, Bourdieu (2002) laments, “social sciences (are) condemned to serve the directly interested orders of company bureaucracies or the state or to die through lack of finance” (in Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 518). What is more, for at-risk youth organisations in particular, their programs must not only satisfy government and corporate sponsors’ conditions, but, more particularly, satisfy the expectations of adults who set the conditions in the same place, adults who necessarily provide access to sought-after resources; that is, adults who inevitably subscribe to a different—dominant—doxic perspective.

**Conclusion**

Indeed, young people as a group are socially disadvantaged in a way that warrants explicit strategies to redistribute resources and opportunities; some individuals know and live in the world in ways that are more/less associated with particular events; there is goodwill and logic in taking measures to pursue the best interests of young people. However, in contrast to this position, this Chapter shows how notions of risk also challenges common sense truths and serves to position young people (and re-position particular groups of young people) in relation to adults. In mapping the “relations of definition” (Beck, 1998) of risk, as it constitutes both an
overlapping doxic truth and intersecting field of power, I showed how notions of risk have “transformed problems offered by political, economic, and moral strategies and concerns, and... made these problems thinkable in new ways and governable with new techniques” (Kelly, 2000a, p. 306), thereby naturalizing and legitimizing the increasing, unquestioned control and management of young people by adults. It follows then that at-risk youth intervention programs “reflects not arbitrary choices but, rather, political choices with political consequences” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 237); Giroux (1999) perceives “reactionary politics parading as common sense” (p. 13).
Chapter 4

Thinking with Bourdieu, I suggest the subtleties of youth(s), truth(s), and social life warrant taking another (closer) look at at-risk youth intervention programs, for goodwill and logic are unfortunately not enough to neutralise relations of power and privilege based on dimensions of identity. The following case study of one at-risk youth intervention program presents the possibility, opportunity, even scaffolding, to explore the traps of at-risk youth intervention programs that reduce the pursuit of youth empowerment to the tiresome reproduction of young people’s domination by adults—traps, since they remain camouflaged against a backdrop of the everyday, deceptive to innocent, randomly-assigned yet distracted (or simply merely socialised) victims, violent, difficult to escape and avoid. These traps go misrecognised in the everyday for what I have earlier (Chapter Two) theorised to be the social construction of youth (youth as a sociological construct, doxa), rationalised by the rules and expectations, boundaries, player positions, and the competition in the field (mapped in Chapter Three).

Case Study: Crossroads

Laying bare the truths without which Crossroads would not be Crossroads surfaces a commotion of contradictions, gaps, dilemmas about youth as a social category, doxic, symbolic, hegemonic; about young people’s experience and struggle; and about adults’ approach to and evaluation of at-risk youth intervention. For examples, Crossroads explicitly insists youth are “worthwhile human beings” (Newsletter, Fall 2008, p. 5); yet ultimately non-adult, thereby worthwhile in a qualitatively different way than are adults. Crossroads shares a volunteer’s sentiment that “I believe in kids” (Egan, n.d.); yet, it seems, only some kids, some times. Crossroads is said to offer “a second opportunity to avoid making mistakes” (Easterby, 1990); yet fails to question the
implications of (not to mention the judgment made in) this very statement. Crossroads is a “helping place” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990) for sure; yet it is unclear how help is conceptualised and for whom. “It’s picked for all of Canada, the best program for youth” (Stephenson, 2001a, p. A1); yet the rationale on which such a claim is based raises important questions. These questions begin where Crossroads confidently claims what is “obvious” (in Egan, 1992), what “makes the most sense” (in Crich, 1994), what “Common sense tells you” (Stephenson, 2001c).

The following case study suggests this particular at-risk youth intervention program is founded on a series of cultural arbitraries that assume and depend upon a particular knowledge of youth, and hence young people. Further, Crossroads holds stake in and thus reproduces said arbitrariness for the historical and embodied, social and political relationships exposed across the field of at-risk youth intervention programs. As expected, Crossroads documents are outwardly about young people (albeit a very specific population of), a social category, an empirical thing; but amid the words, between the lines, and all over the pages, I identify and take up several reoccurring themes with which this at-risk youth intervention program is also very much a conversation: age, biology, and bodies; time, especially the future; difference, that which distinguishes adults from young people and privileges adulthood over youth; risk, un/certainty, control, and knowledge, knowing and truth and myth—and domination. It is these latter themes which go misrecognised in at-risk youth intervention programs, subsequently evading individual and collective consciousness and functioning to derail Crossroads’ (and presumably others’) efforts to empower young people.
**Young people: Naturalised, romanticised, problematised**

Crossroads doxa is immediately unsettled by my return to a question borrowed from Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith (1999), which is: what makes this program specifically for youth (see Youth development section)? The program’s age requirements alone, that is, the sorting and selection of only 12- to 17-year olds, implies an unspoken expectation that individuals aged 12-17 years (that is, over 4,384 days, but less than 6,573) share some collective experience or quality or lack thereof on the basis of their common age—also their assumed difference from those aged more/less than 12-17 years. Biologically younger bodies, the theory goes and Crossroads’ age requirements imply, do not (cannot) know better; older bodies should already know better. Says one young person of her so-called at-risk peers, “Soon it will be too late... They’ll be older and the second chance won’t be given to them anymore” (Morden, 1990b). (Of course, it is very likely that program participants over 17 years old would make Crossroads ineligible for funding from Ontario’s Ministry of Children and Youth Services.) Moreover, further sorting participants by age (for example, 12-14 year-olds attend program on Tuesday evenings, 15-17 attend Wednesdays) implies the commonality is strongest between those bodies with the smallest age.

Moreover, Morden (1990a) refers to a “teenage uniform,” as if all young people play for the same team, share a common identity and view of the game. The implication is made that the “many challenges” of (and unique to) youth (Annual Report 2008, p. 6) are experienced by all young people, in the same ways. A Crossroads graduate imagines “a typical teenager... popular and smart, everything was going my way” (Annual Report 2008, p. 2), where “typical” seems to communicate an ideal, a standard, presumably normative, conforming and compliant, ultimately unmarked by difference.
According to Crossroads, youth is a very specific age range characterised by “extraordinary changes... socially, physically and cognitively” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6). Says one Crossroads executive, “the human brain is still being developed,” explaining young people’s weaknesses in managing “emotions, planning, organizing, judgment, problem solving, impulse inhibition, analysis, self-awareness, self-concept and identity” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6). Experts in child psychology and policing and other “well validated [research] findings” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6) confirm these youthful bodies are incomplete and inexperienced, therefore fundamentally different from adults.

It is this difference that makes possible the following statement: “All too often, we look at youth as young adults who do not need us any longer. Just the reverse is true” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6, emphasis added). I notice how first-person plural pronouns litter Crossroads documents to express the perspective of adults, in which the first person speaker (“we,” “us”) is always adult, constructing youth as the Other, adulthood remains the default perspective of the program. Two (formerly mis-)recognised assumptions: firstly, that those aforementioned “challenges” of youth are somehow not applicable to adults; and secondly, young people are dependent on adults, said to “need the support of caring adults for the development of these [essential social] skills” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6), to make “a successful transition from adolescence to early adulthood” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010, emphasis added).

Youth “allows for new opportunities for the young person to grow, learn” (Annual Report 2009, p. 6), imagined as merely the “start” (in Morden, 1990a) of a journey en route to adulthood. Indeed, the future is a theme entrenched in the program; Crossroads reifies time as progress and designates adulthood as the ultimate destination for young people to look towards.
Coaches “[demonstrate] an unselfish love and concern for their future” (“[Crossroads] program helps area youth,” 1992). (I return to this statement later, on discussing whose future.) One volunteer offers that romanticised, rose-coloured cliché, “children are the future” (Morden, n.d.), another proclaims, the “possibilities are endless” (Newsletter, Fall 2008, p. 5).

Program documents describe young people as vulnerable to peer pressure ([Crossroads] Online, 2010), characterised by a tendency to make impulsive and/or poor decisions ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) and engage in risky behaviour. The consequences of these weaknesses: “peer pressure, sexuality, drinking, drug use, education and career paths”) (Annual Report 2008, p. 6), social problems attributed specifically to young people, evidently only young people. “The people at Crossroads believe society can improve only if young people can set realistic and satisfying goals” (“[Crossroads] program helps area youth,” 1992).

In these ways, Crossroads imagines youth as ultimately a paradox: young people are at once victims, for “You can trust that [they] want to make it in life” (Poirier, 2005); yet also a threat, for youth is “the worst kind of trouble” (Annual Report 2008, p. 2); and, in still another sense, young people “have responsibilities as members of the community” (“[Crossroads] gives first time offenders a second chance,” 1994, p. 10). Once again, I see how youth, in all this commotion, is naturalised, universalised, romanticised—also destabilised, moralised, problematised.

Diagnosing the problem: “These kids” and “stupid mistakes”

Crossroads’ director insists “There’s never been a better need” (in Crich, 1994) for at-risk youth intervention programs for it is “hard to be a teenager now... more stress” (McCaffrey, 1991). Program materials cite escalating frequencies of crime committed by young people and also
children younger than 12 years (Dobson, 1988), rapidly increasing rates of so-called girl violence (Annual Report 2008, p. 11), recent technologies (namely, the Internet, instant text messaging) that pose significant threats to young peoples’ health and safety (cyber bullying) (McCaffrey, 2008; Newsletter, Fall 2009, p. 13), also what the local Youth Police Officer perceives to be an increasing prevalence of street drugs (Poirier, n.d.; Dobson, 2006). These issues, which “we read and hear about all too often” (Annual Report 2007, p. 2), inflicts “a lot of pressure on kids today” (Easterby, 1993), says one volunteer, leading them to commit minor crimes, drop out of school, or “[act] out” (Annual Report 2008, p. 2). “When I was 13 years old,” one volunteer remembers, “we used to play hockey in the streets all day long;” he adds: “now that’s not cool” (in Stephenson, 1993). One volunteer explains how the “global economy is creating more financial hardships for families” (Annual Report 2009, p. 8); as another volunteer puts it, social problems multiply as resources wane (“[Crossroads] gives first time offenders a second chance,” 1994). Crossroads’ claim to be a means of “crisis intervention” (Newsletter, Fall 2009, p. 2), suggests then, that youth in modernity is the crisis.

One news journalist (“Annual Campaign begins Thursday,” 1997) understands, “For some [young people], it [youth, especially since the 1990’s], “leads down the wrong path.” Although Crossroads is actually a pseudonym created by yours truly to refer to this one particular at-risk youth intervention program, the original name evokes a similar narrative of time and space, playing on the construction of youth as a journey to adulthood. A young guest speaker warns program participants what not to do, suggesting that her experience in prison means “I’ve gone nowhere” (Browning, 1993), denied entrance to adulthood, doomed to be a kid forever.
In an otherwise negligible photograph that appears on Crossroads’ website and also the 2010 Annual Report cover page (no doubt fleetingly, intuitively selected from among many in a prepackaged stock image bank), the reader is positioned directly behind a young man, his knapsack slung over one shoulder. He seems to be logically considering his next steps: to follow the narrow path leading forward to an illuminated landscape ahead, or, where his attention is directed now, the dark space to his left, off the path and disappearing beyond the limits of the photo. This visual portrayal of a literal crossroads certainly enforces particular understandings of linearity and direction in relation to youth and constructs an overly simplistic dichotomy of good/bad, not/at-riskness; what is more, this particular narrative also troubles democratic notions of choice. In Crossroads, there is a defined “edge” ([Crossroads] program has had success in helping teenagers stay out of jail, 1995) that separates the “wrong path” (Annual Campaign begins Thursday, 1997) from “the right side of the law” (McCann, 1987, emphasis added), there is such a thing as “right choices” ([City’s] young encouraged to stay in school, 1995) and “wrong choices” (in [Crossroads] garners vice-regal praise, 2008)—as if at-riskness is a nominal-level variable (yes/no) rather than a relative point on an indefinite continuum of arbitrary measures.

Crossroads’ flagship program, which I call Real Choices, aims to coach young people in, among other things, self-control, decision-making strategies, goal-setting, “freedom and responsibility” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010), thereby suggesting that the participants either lack these skills, have not fully developed these skills, or else elect to not exercise these skills. Moreover, one Crossroads volunteer, also a Child and Youth Work student, explains youth participants’ experience as, “They end up doing something stupid” (Easterby, 1993); moreover, a former youth participant-turned-staff member calls it a “stupid mistake” (Stephenson, 2001a, p. A1), assuming a choice, and some level of both consciousness and regret. Of course, clinical
research findings on young people’s underdeveloped frontal lobe and other biological/neurological/developmental processes explains such shortcomings: “Research in the fields of preventative programs for at-risk youth and offender rehabilitation indicates that many young offenders show delays in their development of cognitive and reasoning skills... these teens fail to reflect on their own behaviour,” says one (in Annual Report 2007, p. 2). The problem is thereby diagnosed as within the individual, something biological, “cognitive-based” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010). At one point, Crossroads welcomed referrals from family doctors (Stephenson, 2001b). Past guest speakers at Crossroads’ parenting program include not only police officers, but also a nurse and a suicide worker (Newsletter, Spring 2009, p. 11). Though not included in my collected data, I could not help but notice the many news articles on youth mental health filed amongst Crossroads’ media archives.

Crossroads first diagnoses “at-riskness” per se as the problem (or, at least, the concept first appears amongst printed news on Crossroads) in 1995, in an article simply entitled “[Crossroads] to help ‘at-risk’ students”. The article provides this information: “kids in the system who haven’t reached the point of being in trouble, but have shown characteristics (of being at-risk);” later, naming “at-risk’ characteristics such as faltering academics, social difficulties, anti-social peer associations...” A more explicit clarification of at-riskness is nowhere to be found in neither Crossroads materials nor local news documents, including those recently published. Crossroads encloses the term between inverted commas each time the term appears throughout program documents (“at-risk”), alluding to their careful use of the term; yet, neither is their use of special punctuation discussed. Also, since 1995, a separate Crossroads program has been developed for those “youth who score lower on risk-need assessments” (Annual Report 2008, p. 12)—that is, technically not at-risk youth; also those “who are involved
in activities that would lead to police contact” (Annual Report 2009, p. 15, emphasis added)—in other words, youth at-risk for being at-risk; and those who “are behaving in a manner in which contact with the law is imminent” (Newsletter, Spring 2008, p. 10)—where the unknown probability meant by risk is predicted as sure certainty. Elsewhere, a police supporter of the program explains, “A lot of young offenders are first-timers and will probably never be in contact with the law again” (in McCann, 1987). While there are obviously limitations to the amount of information a single news article or any 8.5’’x11’’ program flyer can share, and risk assessment (even in a context not of youth) is certainly a sophisticated science, the vagueness and incompleteness of Crossroads’ use of the concept, the many subcategories and perplexing contradictions therein, requires the reader’s unconscious knowledge to fill in the gaps, which serves to weaken any social justice approach intended in the utility of the concept, to discount good questions about at-riskness (see Chapter Three for examples) before these questions even arise. In fact, it seems Crossroads’ enrolment process (that is, most often court-ordered participation) precludes even its own critical analysis of at-riskness, for young people are labeled as such by others (judge, police, principal) prior to, and more specifically, as a prerequisite for, their registration in the program.

This particular group of young people are said to be “no different than any other teenagers” (Egan, 1986a), they have only “regular problems” (cited in Egan, 1986b). The then-current Crossroads’ Director states, “There are no social or economic barriers in [Crossroads]. The teens come from all walks of life” (in Crich, 1994), and the pages of Crossroads’ website and newsletters feature photos of teenaged faces representing all shapes and colours (an extraordinarily confusing paradox, since I earlier discussed the relative homogeneity of the Crossroads’ community). Further, a curious group of words caught my attention as I studied
Crossroads documents, words like, “fate,” (Dobson, 1988), “chance” (McCann, 1987), “lucky” (Morden, 1990b), “gamble” (Barone, 1990)—words that serve a status quo imagination of at-riskness as indeed something random and arbitrary, equally distributed among all people. Nevertheless, it is these particular young people who, among others, have inevitably been sorted and subsequently selected from among a much larger population as Crossroads’ “target” population (Newsletter, Spring 2009, p. 10), diagnosed as at-risk, identified as ideal participants for “a remedial and preventative life-skills program” (“[Crossroads] to help ‘at-risk’ students,” 1995). The words “remedial” and “preventative” prompt understandings of an individual deficiency needing treatment to be corrected to *normal*; also elements of prediction and statistical likelihoods (certainties), an urgency for safety and security.

A local judge and long-time supporter of Crossroads insists, “that if there is ‘one common thread in these kids, it’s a feeling of low self-esteem” (Egan, 1992; see also Carl, 1995). I immediately perceive this statement to be inaccurate (even ironic) for its misrecognition of youth as a marginalized social status (more on self-esteem later, not to mention the gross underestimation of the ways social differences appear and function here), therefore meaningful for my discussion here. That is, I argue, if there is one common thread in “these kids,” it is that they are in fact “kids,” youth status, non-membership in an adult-dominated society. Another example: participants of Crossroads’ in-school suspension program list one of the following events as the reason for their suspension: bullying, fighting, opposition to authority (Newsletter, Spring 2009, p. 10)—each of which I see as symptoms of a power struggle, the last of which being a power struggle specifically between a young person and an adult. By easily explaining a young person’s experience according to common sense knowledge of youth as troublesome and problematic, plagued by poor self-esteem and unreasonable behaviour, Crossroads manages to
misrecognise age as a privilege, that is, youth as a disadvantaged, adulthood as a privileged position in the field.

**Recommending “best practice” (or, “ingredients for success”)**

“The name... was chosen because it suggests youngsters can bounce back” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990), explains Crossroads founders, to “straighten out their lives” (Churchill, 1999) and “turn my life around” (Annual Report 2009, p. 2). Throughout the Crossroads material, references to the metaphor of youth as a one-way corridor leading to adulthood appear over and again, a sort of obsession develops over the future. Lessons are designed to “support [youth people] as they are learning to plan their lives” (Annual Report 2009, p. 7), “to help them succeed long-term” (p. 6), that is, to leave the trouble of youth behind for the gratifications of adulthood. For Crossroads to “steer an adolescent away from a path to crime” (Zandbergen, 1987), a particular direction is imagined, also an asymmetrical relationship of adult (driver) to young person (passenger) (which I do not overlook, see below).

Crossroads insists their programs are based on “the best evidence-based literature to provide best practice services” (Annual Report 2009, p. 8), where this notion of “best practice” commits much the same violence as pre-reflective insistence on one’s best interests—a tricky truth in itself. The agency’s website tells me, “Experts in youth justice now agree on the major causes of youth crime and the most effective methods to make a positive difference with young people” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010). Crossroads’ girls-only program “addresses the root causes [of increasing rates of girl violence] and builds self-esteem and confidence” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010). I notice how “the root causes” remain unnamed, which lets the reader only assume that self-esteem and confidence are the solutions to said causes. Elsewhere, a similar
statement tosses around words like, “consensus,” and “correlates and causes” (Annual Report 2009, p. 11), constructing what appears to be a statistically-significant, causal relationship, thereby reducing young people’s (girls’) experiences of violence to thirty-words-or-less (no doubt locating the problem within the individual). If girl violence (or young people’s drug abuse or familial conflict or academic failure...) can be understood as an isolated incident (independent of other social forces, for example), it follows that “best practice” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) takes an additive, “cognitive-based” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) approach, of which the “ingredients for success” have evidently been isolated and identified (Rose, 1992). Rather than a comprehensive, social justice approach to the struggles of at-risk youth (in this case, girls), a Crossroads volunteer is praised for “She knows how to get into the kids’ heads” (Newsletter, Spring 2009, p. 17). In this way, expert testimony in young people’s social lives serve to shut down any opportunity for further reflection on the context and circumstances of both young people and at-riskness, and so-called “cognitive-based” teaching strategies unconsciously belittle the real-world knowledge of young people by failing to recognise their subordinated position in the field from which they learn, move about, struggle.

Crossroads’ goals of “strengthening youth before behaviours and issues escalate in the potentially devastating events” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) make early intervention—prevention—not only possible but necessary. A prevention ideology makes possible statements like “too little, too late” (in Egan, 1989), legitimating greater anxiety and control over young people earlier, such as Crossroads’ recent program expansion to “start serving children” under 12 years old (Coad, 2007). Prevention ideologies construct young people as objects to be protected, as evidenced in the tag line for Crossroads’ parenting program: “How to drug proof your kids”
Prior to the 1990’s, Crossroads was principally a self-esteem program for young people. “Low self esteem is a common denominator,” says (McCann, 1987), and “troubled kids aren’t bad kids and won’t become criminals and welfare bums if given the opportunity to develop self-esteem and realize they can achieve productive, successful lives” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990). The implications of this statement are distressing, firstly, for the relationships drawn between self-esteem and at-risk youth, at-riskness and danger and poverty, and im/morality and un/deservingness; and secondly, for the inevitability and urgency that is communicated, reminiscent of nineteenth-century child-saving, rationalised through public fear of and anger toward select social undesirables, that justifies not only early prevention and intervention, but especially promotes neo-liberal values. In the same way, it is alarming that Crossroads accepts into their program only those at-risk youth “who show remorse and are sorry for what they’ve done” (Fitzmaurice, 1989). When I spoke briefly with Crossroads’ Director, she wanted me to notice a shift in youth programming in general (Crossroads included), starting in the 1990’s, from a curriculum based around issues of self-esteem, to what she and Crossroads calls “life skills,” of which self-esteem per se is only a minor component. While her thoughts on the issue were simply in disagreement with self-esteem as a “common denominator,” another Crossroads volunteer (in Rose, 1992) argues against the effectiveness of self-esteem education, for increased “self-esteem [only] makes them think they can rob Mac’s Milk better”—a valid argument, I suppose, according to a most raw reasoning process of logic, but, upon more practical reflection (as in Bourdieu’s logic of practice), this statement is little more than a
reflection of a cultural mistrust in, fear of, hostility towards young people, especially those deemed at-risk.

Crossroads volunteers are “carefully screened and highly trained” (Annual Campaign begins Thursday, 1997). Volunteer applicants must have “at least 21 years of age” (Zandbergen, 1987); evidently, just as some young people are wise sometimes, not all adults are adult-like always. Further, one Crossroads volunteer explains her qualifications as a coach: “I figure I’ve got something I can help teens with... I’ve already been there,” she says, adding, and “I’ve got teens of my own” (in Volunteer enjoys her role working on [Crossroads] team, 1996). This statement seems logical for both the speaker, the reporter, likely the average reader; yet it is another example of the ways youth is constructed as merely a place in time, a universal experience, of which adults have expert knowledge. For this reason, I see the above statement as a violent disembodiment of youth and denial of young people’s testimony.

It is significant that the vast majority of those responsible for determining which young people are at-risk, those who founded Crossroads, those who currently lead and direct Crossroads, those who fund and evaluate the program share a privileged perspective on the world. From what I can deduce from Crossroads materials, this group is comprised of only adult bodies, presumably from a middle-class background. I gather this information firstly, from Crossroads policy on volunteer recruitment (see above), and secondly, from Crossroads’ greatest

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5 Sometime after 2004, the age requirement was decreased to 19, though no explanation is given to legitimate this seemingly arbitrary age requirement nor the change in policy I might venture to suggest the change was made to allow co-op students from the nearby community college to participate, which reflects both an administrative necessity (to expand the pool of eligible volunteers, to embrace a mutually-beneficial relationship with the college) and, like Crossroads’ addition of a specific program for young people less than 12 years old, indicates a one-time disruption to the doxic principle, immediately compensated with yet another doxic principle.
current fundraiser event. Let me explain: The annual formal Gala evening event, tickets for which are sold for $85 each, including a five course Italian meal, after-dinner jazz music and dancing, and a $35 charitable donation tax receipt, also featuring both live and silent auctions (items include autographed athletic jerseys, vacation rentals), an ice sculpture, and a raffle draw for two tickets to attend the Masters professional golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia, U.S.A.. This special event (ticket price, menu, entertainment) has been imagined by a middle-class committee, catered to the learned tastes (see Bourdieu, 1984) of a middle-class audience, and reproduces middle class cultural values.

Additionally, for the most part (I gather from Crossroads documents), a vocational perspective common to what I will call helping professions (mostly in child and youth work, education, psychology and social work, policing and law) (see Annual Report 2008, p. 16 for Board of Directors by occupation), which, in addition to their obvious vested interested in Crossroads itself, is evidence of their trust (or at least hope) in social institutions. It is logical that those individuals who have (been given) the resources and opportunity, and thus authority to work/volunteer for non-profit agencies, and those whose careers are dedicated to public social services lead this particular at-risk youth intervention program; however, the problem I wish to identify is that an over-representation of middle-class adults informs a limited, privileged perspective on youth, not/at-riskness, and at-risk youth intervention.

To be fair, I see how Crossroads does seek to incorporate young people’s voice in a more significant way. Their commitment to client confidentiality is a rightful and necessary priority of any agency with access to sensitive knowledge, especially that on young people; however, an unintended consequence of that policy is the rationalisation made possible to further silence
young people’s voices. The agency’s Fall 2008 Newsletter explains, “It is our hope that we are also able to include more youth input into the program” (p. 12). Young people are imagined as active participants in other ways, for example, “Each session’s topics are chosen by staff after consultation with the participating youth and their parents/guardians” (Annual Report, 2009, p. 12). Nevertheless, as this example suggests, I notice how on each occasion where young people’s voice is evidently sought and collected, adult voices are relied upon as a sort of truth filter, functioning as a power of veto. To review participants’ experience in the program, Crossroads distributes feedback surveys to both young people and their parents, eventually presenting young people’s feelings on their own behaviour post-Crossroads (communication, family relationships, school attendance/grades, decision-making) alongside their parents’ reports (Who should readers believe?) For their community restorative justice programs, “all the parties decide together” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) the outcomes, but, based on my earlier discussion of Bessant’s (2003) analysis of youth participation in decision-making (see Chapter Two), this statement is unlikely and problematic, for “all the parties” (young offender, adult facilitators) inevitably occupy different (unequal) positions in the field. In fact, as a self-described mentorship program, Crossroads therefore admits an inherently unequal playing field. A volunteer insists best practice is “talking to [youth participants], not at them” (Egan, 1986a)—what if adults talked with them? Further, as a diversion from court or as an alternative to custody, Crossroads’ referral process means that young people are coerced to acquiesce to adult (judge, police, parent) decisions; for example, “police make a deal with the young offender to withdraw a charge so long as the program is completed” (Churchill, 1999). It should be no surprise that in this context of unbalanced power, adults report “discipline problems are few” (see Egan, 1986a).
A graduate describes a technique he learned from Crossroads, how to prevent his anger from having adverse effects: “Things like squeezing me [sic] fingers and crunching my toes” (in Annual Report 2009, p. 15). This is concerning because it indicates (what I call) a “Band-aid solution;” that is, a response I find common among education and social service initiatives, one that treats the short-term symptoms of a problem but fails to address the cause, so that while the trouble seems to disappear, the underlying problem and effects remain unchanged (if not exacerbated) long after. This problematic is also reflected in Crossroads’ survey research designed to measure program graduates’ success. For instance, the agency’s Annual Report 2010 concludes (among other findings) 87% of young people from the most recent cohort of Real Choices graduates report “significant improvement” in communication, 81% report improvement in relationships with family members, 80% improvement in school attendance and grades (p. 21). These statistics indicate notable individual progress in accordance with the program’s goals—yet, even though I acknowledge the formidable challenge of measuring Crossroads success (I reflect on this “success” more specifically, next), I question the reliability of this research (that is, the extent to which these questions, responses, findings accurately measure what they are intended). Accessing the data would not necessarily resolve my uneasiness; rather, my reservations lie in what I see as Crossroads’ misrecognition of the symptoms (communication, family conflict, academics) for the causes (power imbalance between youth/young people and adult/hood) of the struggles of at-risk youth.

**Defining success: On “the changes to have a fulfilling and happy life”**

It seems to me, empowerment for young people is not about “the right way” (Stephenson, 2001b, p. A1); nor “wrong” choices (Egan, n.d.). Empowerment is “[overcoming] the various obstacles
in their lives” (Annual Report 2009, p. 5); but not “accepting what you can’t change” (in Crich, 1994). Empowerment is “the power to be myself” (Annual Report 2009, p. 2), not “to change a way of thinking” (Fitzmaurice, 1989). Crossroads confounds “[empowerment]” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) with “[transformation]” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990), social control for social justice. Where Crossroads talks about “the changes to have a fulfilling and happy life” (Newsletter, Fall 2009, p. 2), how “we can all make this world a better place to be” (Annual Report 2009, p. 9) a very specific way of life is imagined therein, a future consistent with the worldview of those who imagine youth, and subsequently, at-risk youth and at-risk youth intervention programs. In Crossroads’ 2010 Annual Report, a (select) former program participant, Jessica, is given an opportunity to share her Crossroads experience, what she learned, how her life is different since, what/who she appreciated most; the column title, “Wisdom from the youth” (p. 3) suggests sometimes, some young people are wise.

Crossroads frequently speaks of a “better person” (Annual Report 2009, p. 12). From its usage and from what I perceive as its intended meaning, this “better person” is imagined in the likeness of its inventor (and benefactor)—that is, adult, middle class, an engaged participant in various established social institutions. The successful program graduate is, as one young person expresses, “more mature” (Annual Report 2009, p. 15)—yet it is important to notice how, for every Crossroads program that aims to teach assertiveness to young people who yield to peer pressure, another seeks to treat aggression in those who are too assertive. A recent Crossroads graduate, asked to comment on his experience since participating in the program, says, “I haven’t been so bossy and mouthy to anyone lately” (Annual Report 2007, p. 7). This particular word—“mouhy”—catches my attention for it strikes me as an adult word, that is, a word that reflects in
a subtle way an adult way of knowing, in particular, knowing young people. As if in reply, I later find the Crossroads Director to use the same word in another article (see McCaffrey, 1997).

Secondly, Crossroads’ imagined “better person” is also a member of the middle-class. Contrary to common sense, “self-respect, self-worth and values” (Egan, 1989)—also decision-making, goal-setting, “character training” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990), as one volunteer puts it—these are all certainly relative qualities, imagined in different ways from different perspectives on the world because of the difference between perspectives on the world. Early in Crossroads programming, “Each table is named after an expensive sports car...” (Morden, 1990), assuming a Jaguar is a universal, realistic, motivating aspiration for all young participants.

Finally, the “better person” is also one who values and accepts so-called traditional social institutions, especially home and family, school, law. A Crossroads graduate conceptualises her achievement and success since the program, saying, “I’m doing great in school now, I’m living a drug free healthy lifestyle, getting along with my family and most importantly, I have moved back home” (Annual Report 2009, p. 2). Adult qualities, middle class values, and a young person’s participation in traditional social institutions are taken as assurance of a future of “productivity” (“[Crossroads] program has had success in helping teenagers stay out of jail, 1995), thereby neutralising or at least controlling the risk once posed.

Says one volunteer, “anything that keeps troubled youths... control over them is good (in Rose, 1992). As I discussed above, Crossroads certainly promotes greater institutionalisation of youth; moreover, Crossroads maintains formal relationships with a number of formal institutions, obviously the city police and Ontario Provincial Police, and the Youth Criminal Justice Act, for
which Crossroads serves as a Youth Justice provision made therein (Poirier, 2003), also the local public and separate school boards, specifically *Bill 212 to Amend the Education Act*, which requires in-school provisions for suspended students (Newsletter, Spring 2008, p. 9). Further, Crossroads has recently designed a new program with ongoing intake for those young people considered in need of immediate intervention (Annual Report 2008, p. 12), indicative of Crossroads’ trust in greater institutionalisation of young people as a means of responding to at-risk youth.

According to one Crossroads volunteer, young people in prison “represent the broken dreams of our society” and “hurts all society” (Linder, 1992). Crossroads Director explains, “We are very fortunate to have such an innovative approach to resolve justice issues for youth” (Annual Report 2007, p. 15). In each of these sentiments, subtle first-person plural pronouns (“our,” “we”) make a distinction between “us” and “them,” helping to construct youth/young people as the Other, at-risk youth as the other Other (that is, a disadvantaged group within an already marginalised group). Statements like these go misrecognised by those who need not question their membership in the dominant group; for those whose status in the field is marked inferior, subtle exclusions emerge more conspicuously. Evidently, even statements like, “Public protection must be the principal objective of youth justice renewal” (Poirier, 2003)—statements which harbor an unmistakable (yet misrecognisable) preference for one group over another—are understood in a way (as something natural, logical, rational) that fails to raise questions (or demand answers) about just whose interests are served over those of Other/others.

Throughout Crossroads news material especially, readers are consistently re-assured that Crossroads “does not pose a burden on the taxpayer” (Egan, 1989), for, though Crossroads, as a
publicly-funded agency, costs taxpayers $100 per participant, it would otherwise cost the province closer to $1,000 for that same young person to appear before a criminal court judge one time (Fitzmaurice, 1989). Related, one Crossroads volunteer sees himself as “paying my dues to the community” (Morden, 1990a), another conceptualises her helping young people as a “community obligation” (in Easterby, 1993). “Volunteers polish up the rough spots in our communities” (Newsletter, Fall 2008, p. 2), reads one news headline—it is distressing that so-called “rough spots” could be understood as specific young people. In this way, notions of prevention are evoked alongside ideologies of personhood.

Further, Crossroads “Participants are taught that they have the ability to control the course their lives will take and that ultimately, they alone are responsible for their actions’ (Egan, 1986a). The program is “self-help” (Easterby, 1990) to “enable [young people] to make responsible decisions for themselves” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010). Says one volunteer, toying with notions of child-saving, also neoliberal values of choice, responsibility, competition, self-governance: “We’re not saving kids. We’re helping them save themselves” (“Volunteers transform troubled teens,” 1990). The point is, of course Crossroads volunteers are “really caring people. They make you feel like you matter” (McCann, 1987), but my concern is that at-risk youth matter for at-risk youth intervention programs in an unconsciously, otherwise-interested way.

Where once Crossroads considered the task of measuring feedback too difficult (in Egan, 1986b; also Rose, 1992), by 1988 Crossroads was confidently boasting a 70% success rate (Fitzmaurice, 1989). The key question to determining Crossroads’ success, that is, “Is the program successful?” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) is overly simplistic hence amply convincing;
its response, an overwhelmingly positive statistic (like, “78 per cent of the youth in the program reported that [it] helped them deal with the reasons they were suspended”) ([Crossroads] Online, 2010) is equally as persuasive. “But the bottom line,” [Crossroads’ founder] adds, is ‘we know it works. The changes we see here are very obvious. They’re changes in attitude. They come here with a chip on their shoulder and they change’” (Egan, 1992). When local clinical psychologist declares “[Crossroads] is a wonderful program” (in Rose, 1992), Crossroads staff, sponsors, participants, and strangers are likely to believe it; to question his opinion is to question his expert authority in the field. While “Those who have been through the program and are charged [with a crime] again, are unable to get back into the program” (Fitzmaurice, 1989), other young people apparently deemed successful Crossroads graduates are invited to speak to the merit and effectiveness of the program. Crossroads promoters frequently recall a former youth program participant who was later hired by (currently still works at) Crossroads as a program co-ordinator (cite), an event interpreted by the agency as a token—proof—of their science/magic. Now, Crossroads acknowledges their program is not guaranteed, that “Are we going to help every kid? No” (in Poirier, 2005); which is absolutely reasonable; but, it seems to me, Crossroads is necessarily preoccupied\(^6\) with playing the game (that is, to compete for and secure a greater position, thus funding), that they have little time left over to reflect on how the program responds/not to the struggles of those “10 youth out of 100 [who] re-offend” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010), let alone the inadequacies of expert testimony and statistics to capture the wholeness of youth experiences, or the ways in which conventional measures of success for at-

\(^6\) at least since the mid-1990’s, at which time I notice a shift in focus from young people, youth crime, youth programming, to business, finances, program expansion
risk youth intervention programs reflect the many paradoxes and categories and domination of youth/young people.

Nonetheless, sponsorship initiatives are consistently successful, since, “Nobody has said no [to donating]” (in Stephenson, 2000). “There just seems to be so much spoken support for what we’re doing” (in Poirier, 2002), comments the Crossroads director. Indeed, from the program’s well-established reputation to its continued practice and back again, “Our long history confirms...” ([Crossroads] Online, 2010). Youth program graduates-come-volunteers are said to complete a “full circle” (Annual Report 2009, p. 10). Likewise, following the introduction of new government legislation on youth issues, a respected community politician argues against the proposal for corresponding revisions to Crossroads and especially the suggestion to completely dismantle and redesign a new intervention program for at-risk youth; he argues against reflecting on this thing called youth and the ways Crossroads responds, reasoning, “Let’s not re-invent the wheel here” (Poirier, 2002).

Conclusion

Youth is imagined without question as an empirical group of bodies of similar age, biology, possessing a specific set of qualities, skills, experience—in relation to those of other bodies, adult bodies. This version of youth reproduces the fields of power and the relationships responsible for its construction, in ways that self-legitimate and self-perpetuate, and evade conscious knowledge. This version of youth makes at-risk youth intervention programs possible in the ways that youth is naturalised, problematised and idealised, politicised, controlled and

7 a completely accidental yet opportune and appropriate return to my (Chapter Two) discussion of Grossberg’s (2001) question “who could be (and what would it even mean to be) against children” (p. 132)?
managed, exploited and silenced. Ironically, *reflexivity* is a cornerstone of the Crossroads program ("[Young people] have to learn to step back, take a look at the situation") (in Mathewson, 1997); yet content analysis of this particular at-risk youth intervention program shows a pattern of violent unintended consequences of admittedly good intentions that persist and reproduce un/misrecognised. The arbitrariness of the truths found in this particular at-risk youth intervention program reflects the cultural arbitrary of youth, which is directly related to the arbitrary distribution of power in the fields of youth and at-risk youth intervention programs. Crossroads is, indeed just one of many at-risk youth intervention programs, based on much the same doxic principles and facing many the same constitutive obstacles as others in the field.
Chapter 5

A good concept... destroys many false problems... and brings up other, real problems.

-Pierre Bourdieu

This paper locates the dilemma that is the unquestioned reproduction of social inequality by at-risk youth intervention programs in the ways doxa and field, that is, cultural knowledge, practices, and players, individually and collectively, function to maintain unequal relations. This paper shows how at-risk youth intervention programs are inherently busy and complicated, ultimately messy sites for sociological analysis, their analysis and evaluation no less. Thinking with Bourdieu and doxa and field, his theory as method, shows how at-risk youth intervention programs is a site where philanthropy, reality, politics collide, where good intentions are confronted by histories of power and language conveys deeper meaning than dictionary entries allow, where the lines that separate culture and knowledge blur and dis/re/appear. In this way, “Thinking is a public activity” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 112). Taking another (closer) look at at-risk youth intervention programs through this lens makes it possible to re-imagine the problematic posed by at-risk youth intervention programs, to think about at-risk youth intervention programs in terms more meaningful than permitted by a simple dichotomy, to grasp more accurately, more completely the subtleties of the relations of social relations that inform, pressure, constrain, shape, promote at-risk youth intervention programs.

Making connections

Arguments that portray administrators, sponsors, and front line staff of youth organizations as conscious conspirators in a war against youth assume these individuals exist outside a world where youth discourse is pervasive and naturalised; a perspective Bourdieu refers to as
“pernicious utopianism” (Honneth et. al, 1986, cited in Holton, 2000, p. 90). Rather, these individuals are ultimately merely individual social actors, knowing the world only as it has been constructed, legitimized, reproduced through history, embodied, naturalised. For example, Wishart et. al (2006) describe teachers as “the foot soldiers in the process of constructing [youth at-risk]” if only because their jobs require them to also play the game (p. 299).

Although I have come to recognize the problematic posed by some at-risk youth intervention programs sometimes, I am confident that the good intentions outwardly expressed count for something. Crossroads’ adult volunteers certainly “genuinely care about [young people] and want to help” (Dobson, 1988), many adult volunteers have treated many young people so they may know “I’m special and that I mean something to many people” (Annual Report 2010, p. 15), perhaps “had it not have been for [Crossroads], I wouldn’t have made it out of adolescence alive” (Annual Report 2008, p. 2). Of course, Crossroads represents a group of “caring people from the community” (Rose, 1992) that no doubt share a “commitment to youth” ( Stephenson, 2000), which is surely “a great cause” (Poirier, 2006). Only, as Fowler (1996) explains, “the tragedy of most social investigation... that its opinion surveys or bureaucratically generated interviews are often worthless: they merely elicit presentations if the self and of everyday experience which correspond to prevailing orthodoxies” (p. 2). Giroux (1999) insists the problem is rather, “...the production of knowledge by the middle class is paved only with good intentions” (p. 9), plus symbolic labour always translates to symbolic power (in Swartz, 1997, p. 93).

Peter Kelly (2007), interested in a related dilemma of at-risk youth policies, discusses Withers and Batten’s (1995) work on humanistic and economic intentions (p. 40). These authors
identify, in the first instance, a ‘humanistic intention’... This intention is grounded in concerns about harm, danger, care and support, for those young people who might be at-risk. In the second instance, an ‘economic intention’ legitimates these attempts to regulate youthful identities. This intention foregrounds the costs and the benefits—to young people and families, but primarily to communities and the nation—of identifying risk factors and populations at-risk, and of mobilising certain interventions on the basis of these interventions (p. 40, emphasis his).

Though Withers and Batten insist humanistic and economic intentions are distinct and competing, but “not necessarily conflicting or contra-distinctive” (p. 40), I argue there is a danger simply in distinguishing one from the other. Rather, my analysis of at-risk youth intervention programs makes a case for a far more complicated, yet accurate portrayal of this good/bad phenomenon, for “Refusing to separate culture from systemic relations of power, or politics from the production of knowledge and identities...” (in Giroux, 1999, p. 1) Gramsci (1916) urges

We must break the habit of thinking that culture is encyclopaedic knowledge whereby man [sic] is viewed as a mere container in which to pour and conserve empirical data or brute disconnected facts which he will have to subsequently pigeonhole in his brain as in the columns of a dictionary so as to be able to eventually respond to the varied stimuli of the external world. This form of culture is truly harmful, especially to the proletariat. It only serves to create misfits, people who believe themselves superior to the rest of humanity because they have accumulated in their memory a certain quantity of facts and dates which the cough up at every opportunity to almost raise a barriers between themselves and others (cited in Giroux, 1999, p. 9).

McWilliam (1997) suggests, “all Holy Wars require casualties and infidels, all utopias come wrapped in barbed wire” (p. 221).
The paradox of empowerment

The paradox of empowerment is very much a paradox of education. Though education is widely represented as an “a public good and a means for personal fulfillment” (Wyn & Dwyer, 2000, p. 152), the most promising vehicle for social mobility, education teaches only “particular things... in particular ways” (Schubert, 2008, p. 188). An interrogation of education is an interrogation of unconscious frameworks that shape doxa (Swartz, 1997, p. 189), and the frameworks that build and reproduce the fields of power in which doxa is constructed. More specifically, teaching, learning, testing, achievement, development, failure are truths determined according to routines which are deemed “normal,” according to majority rule (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331-332), and without critical evaluation of the “normalecy” that is found there (te Riele, 2006, p. 139). Looking on the paradox from another angle is Giroux (1999); he writes, “Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship” (p. 3). Education is then in this sense a sort of lovechild of patriarchy and colonialism; especially for at-risk youth intervention programs, young people sorted and selected as being risky to the social order.

In this way, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) suggest, “because the ways that educators advance these visions [of citizenship] may privilege some political perspectives regarding the ways problems are named and responded to, there is a politics involved in educating for democracy—a politics that deserves careful attention” (p. 263). Bourdieu argues there can be no such thing as a disinterested act (see Grenfell, 2008, p. 165, Swartz, 1997, p. 90). He insists all action is inherently interested, that symbolic power cannot be separated from symbolic labour (Swartz, 1997, p. 93). In this way, domination does not require action (Grenfell, 2008, p. 166), nor conscious intention.
Without critical reflection, at-risk youth intervention programs function to enforce conformity to middle-class, adult, institutionalised values, what was designed as transformative practice remains only normative practice, social control, policing, so that empowerment dissolves into domination. The good intentions of at-risk youth intervention programs are neutralised by the embodied, historical nature of youth and the normative implications of risk, sliding back into what is more closely recognised as racism, thereby eliminating the potential for genuine transformative practice. As case study of Crossroads suggests, without questioning traditional methods of youth work, practice is likely to not only neglect the root causes of youth’s experience of inequality and resulting social location (namely, the unequal distribution of power and privilege), but also reinforce irrelevant and oppressive ideologies and exacerbate the existing struggle of at-risk youth, ultimately misrecognising what is youth, the problem, best practice, the solution. This thesis and case study “does raise a whole set of difficult questions concerning the relationships between theory and practice, research and teaching, and teaching and learning; about which we know quite a lot and yet which seem to be by-passed in the common-sensical language with which the agenda for future research practice is set” (Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 512).

**Recommendations**

Greater understanding of social life, insists Swartz (1997), is the means for greater freedom, and ultimately, social change (p. 254). Rather than enforcing a dichotomy of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ at-risk youth intervention programs—assuming we know the right answers—the point is rather to simply contribute to the ongoing conversation on at-risk youth intervention programs as a site of struggle, resistance, and negotiation—to continue to ask the right questions. As Paul Olson put it, in the margin of an earlier draft of this chapter, “While there is certainly
utility in providing education for all, there is also a use in critiquing our own categories (and motives, agendas, consequences) in prescribing ‘help.’” My analysis of youth as doxa and field in at-risk youth intervention programs shows “how knowledge is produced, taken up, and transformed as a force for social change and collective struggle” (Giroux, 1999, p. 15). In this way, “history has a way of breaking free of our intentions, and the effects of our actions, our struggles and even our conspiracies usually have little resemblance to the original aims” ... this intolerable situation is tolerated” (Grossberg, 2001, p. 112).

Grenfell and James (2004) seemingly joke that “no-one ever thanks you for pointing out misrecognition” (p. 518), since, “rethinking is personally revolutionary and entails a ‘total conversion’ of the way we look at the world” (p. 520), which is, of course, hard work. However, this labour is necessary, for, as they continue, “When a large number of individuals in a field do so, however, they free themselves from what is pre-defined as the rules of the game, from the ‘rear-garde,’ and the field does (or at least can) change (Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 520). Alternatively, “A failure to examine the commonsense assumptions regarding students may undermine educational reform efforts. Policies grounded in static ideas of adolescence will likely reproduce, albeit with small chances, current educational practices” (Lesko, 1996, p. 140).

Evidently, good intentions alone are not enough to render age, race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexual identity powerless (Briskin, 1994, p. 452). “If we ‘un-bracket inequalities,’ so that [program] participants no longer involve themselves in the public sphere ‘as if’ they are equals when they are plainly not, then recognition of power disparities will be needed. This is not to suggest that everyone must be comprehensively equal, but that these disparities are both recognised and redressed” (Bessant, 2003, p. 97). I mean not to belittle at-risk youth intervention
programs, their volunteer and paid leaders, directors, sponsors, but simply to demonstrate that difference exists in subtle ways that often evade consciousness, for power and privilege permeate every aspect of social life, including youth. Recognizing and challenging power dynamics in at-risk youth intervention programs means linking reality in Crossroads’ classroom, for example, with reality outside the classroom walls (Briskin, 1994, p. 461). Michael W. Apple (2002) promotes “the act of repositioning,” which states more or less, “that the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power” (p. 135). This is no less an invitation for future research to reconsider, for example, practices of schooling, law, health care, government, from young persons’ perspective, specifically, as Wishart et al. (2006) discuss, the tensions (versus difference) between social control and social justice (Wotherspoon and Schissel, 2001, p. 328 also make this distinction).

Following this, a recommendation for at-risk youth intervention programs—more specifically, of course, those individuals responsible for their design, implementation, evaluation, is as Lisa Delpit (in Briskin, 1994) explains

students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavours; that they must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own ‘expertness’ as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent (p. 452).

I want to think that good intentions can survive—and thrive—in a context where power permeates and shapes social relations, processes, life. Bourdieu (1988) poses an intriguing
question relevant to my exploration here: that is, not whether disinterest is possible (in fact, he argues not) (see Grenfell, 2008, p. 165, Swartz, 1997, p. 90 for this discussion), but instead, “what are the social conditions of possible sites in which virtue pays, in which there is an interest in disinterest?” or, similarly, “can the conditions be created where [the field] has an interest in virtue?” (cited in Grenfell, 2008, p. 167).
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