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Youth Cultures and Education

Stanton Wortham, University of Pennsylvania

An introduction to *Review of Research in Education*, Volume 35

Educators, policymakers and the public are often deeply interested in youth cultures and practices. Young people nowadays, we are told, behave in selfish, deviant, apathetic, irrational, creative, altruistic, engaged, tolerant and various other, often-contradictory ways. Popular accounts label and characterize generation "X," "Y" and now "Z," the "net" generation, the "Peter Pan" generation, the "silent" generation, and so on. Such accounts of youth often have little to do with youth themselves, but instead express adult concerns about the nature and trajectories of social groups. Some adult accounts of youth nonetheless also reflect legitimate hopes and worries for and about them. Educators should attend to widely circulating accounts of youth, because these often yield or buttress attitudes and policies that influence young people. If we take for granted misleading popular accounts of contemporary youth, we may fail to understand young people and treat them in counterproductive ways. On the other hand, insightful accounts of youth and attempts to understand their views can help educators work more successfully with them.

Most popular conceptions of youth culture oversimplify. Many youth beliefs and practices change rapidly and draw on heterogeneous resources that move across the contemporary world. Because of migration, the ease of travel and new media and communications technologies, youth culture crosses social and national borders, often yielding complex hybrids that include both components rooted in local histories and globally circulating forms. Despite this complexity, it is important for both scholars and educators to understand youth cultural practices. These practices infiltrate and mediate other important processes—appearing in schools, for instance, as distractions and sometimes as components of lesson plans, and deeply influencing students' social and personal identities. Many youth practices also involve remarkable creativity and skill, and youth are often more motivated to engage in these practices than in traditional educational activities. If we could understand and incorporate aspects of youth practices into our pedagogy, as many educators have imagined, perhaps we could educate youth more effectively.

Most adults, however, fail to appreciate the full complexity of youth practices—not just their heterogeneity and rapid emergence, but also their reflexivity. At the same time as adults create and circulate accounts of young people, youth create and transform the practices and conceptions that make up "youth cultures." They do not simply engage in activities that we adults might be able to construe for them. They give accounts of their own activities, often in ways that run counter to adult accounts. Furthermore, youth cultural practices usually contain tacit or explicit accounts of the adult world, resisting common norms and stereotypes or celebrating alternative identities and goals. They give accounts of us,

as we give accounts of them. Productive theories of and engagements with youth culture will require a deeper understanding of how adult cultures and youth cultures construe each other.

Both adult accounts of youth, and youth cultures themselves, are reflexive: they involve characteristic signs, ideals and practices that groups circulate and engage in, and they involve meta-level accounts of those signs, ideals and practices. Adults create and enforce educational scripts and standards, for instance, and they also construe these as appropriate ways to behave and reasonable goals to have. Youth create and consume contemporary musical genres and multimedia products, for instance, and they often construe these as powerful, engaging and effective. Furthermore, both adults and youth give accounts of each other's signs, ideals and practices—and, in fact, a central part of each group's ideals and practices is based on its accounts of the other. Youth define themselves and organize their action partly in response to their accounts of adult ideals and practices, and adults do the same thing as we develop educational practices that we apply to youth and as we imagine the future of our societies. Of course, both "adults" and "youth" are heterogeneous sets, and so various subsets are offering their own accounts of the signs, ideals and practices of various subsets, such that the full situation is even more complex.

This volume reviews contemporary research on the interplay between youth cultures, educational practices and the accounts that adults and youth tacitly and explicitly give of each other. The articles examine varying types of practice—ranging from computer programming to verbal rap battles to canonical

literacy activities—that take place in various settings around the world—from schools to playgrounds, homes, clubs and through the internet. Most articles describe the historical and material conditions within which these practices occur, exploring the distribution of material and symbolic resources among different types of youth and adults. Each article also tells a story about how adult accounts and youth accounts intersect with some domain of youth practice and with each other. Sometimes this intersection yields hope for mutual understanding and more productive education, as when laudable aspirations embedded in youth practices can intertwine with curricular goals to yield powerful learning experiences. At other times, the intersection yields misunderstanding and attempts by both youth and adults to undermine the other's goals.

Three central themes appear in the articles' accounts of youth culture: youth cultural practices are often creative, global and counter-hegemonic. Almost all of the articles describe youth being highly creative in various types of activities, often in the face of material constraints. Yasmin Kafai and Kylie Peppler describe creative computer programming and "do-it-yourself" multimedia activities that large numbers of youth engage in—both reviewing others' accounts and describing some of their own work on virtual worlds and "wearable computing." Lesley Bartlett, Dina López, Erika Mein and Laura Valdiviezo describe creative out-of-school youth literacy practices in Latin America and the Caribbean, arguing that many policymakers and educators limit themselves to a narrow definition of "literacy" and thus fail to recognize and take advantage of youth engagement and creativity. Maisha Winn and Nadia Behizadeh describe critical literacy practices that many

youth engage in, arguing that youth creativity in such practices is undervalued but a crucial resource that we can use to counteract the epidemic of incarcerated urban youth.

Many of the articles also describe how globalization has transformed youth cultures, bringing resources from around the world into practices that are nonetheless tied to local cultures, histories and material constraints. Shalini Shankar describes how diasporic South and East Asian youth draw on heterogeneous signs, ideals and practices from various parts of the world as they navigate mainstream expectations and develop social identities. She argues that youth do not find the heterogeneity of these resources unsettling, as many adults do, but instead embrace multiplicity and rapid change as they position themselves in increasing complex Western societies. H. Samy Alim traces how hip hop songs and practices circulate around the world, describing hybrid styles in East Asia and elsewhere that can include multiple languages and that connect local histories and resources with global patterns. In these youth cultures multiplicity is valued as the norm and those trying to impose a monoglot standard are portrayed as backward. Thea Abu El-Haj and Sally Bonet argue that Muslim youth from transnational communities creatively fashion senses of belonging by drawing on ideals and practices from various religious, ethnic and national communities. They describe how youth have reacted to stereotypes of Muslims after 9/11 by producing more complex senses of transnational selves and trying to communicate these more nuanced accounts to others.

Most of the articles also describe how youth cultural practices struggle against and sometimes invert hegemonic ideas and practices. Betsy Rymes shows how contemporary media provide youth pathways to collective self-expression that are often opaque not only to adults, but also to youth who are not part of highly specialized peer groups. Intense involvement in hip-hop or on-line fan fiction writing, for example, requires heterogeneous sets of knowledge and depth of involvement not found traditional schooling, which often attempts to tie youth culture down by matching it with mainstream agendas. Jennifer Cole describes how African youth often see themselves as part of a generational rupture or dramatic transformation in how young people enter adulthood, in which they cannot follow the pathways taken by their parents—though she argues that this notion of rupture ovesimplifies. Her article shows how youth culture in some parts of the world is not a simple lifestyle choice, not something to do in leisure time, but is instead central to youths' struggle to count as "adult" in the contemporary world. Alim juxtaposes the intense love of language exhibited by participants in hip hop cultures with the failure of most educators to recognize or engage these young people's abilities and affinities. He shows how, in response to mainstream construals of them, youth involved in hip hop invert traditional value hierarchies—for instance, pointing out the irony of what they call "illiterate" adults who do not even recognize non-mainstream literacies but nonetheless believe that they are empowered to judge who is "literate."

The counter-hegemonic nature of many youth practices means that they invert influential adult ideals. In some cases adults respond in kind, casting youth

cultures as deficient. Bartlett, López, Mein and Valdiviezo show how many policymakers across Latin America and the Caribbean use an oversimplified view of literacy and label many youth as "at risk," deviant and even dangerous. Official attempts to remedy the situation too often rely on literacy programs that ignore the technologically mediated, often multilingual and culturally hybrid literacy practices that contemporary youth engage in. Winn and Behizadeh describe how many poor urban youth in the U.S. are subjected to surveillance in schools that sometimes focus more on discipline than instruction—because adults construe these youth and their practices as deviant and threatening. They show how such accounts of youth, embedded in the educational and juvenile justice systems, facilitate the "school to prison pipeline" that begins with school discipline and ends with a disproportionate number of urban minority youth being incarcerated.

Almost all of the articles ask how educators could more productively relate to creative, global, counter-hegemonic youth practices. Instead of construing youth as different and misguided, could educators learn from and work with youth culture? Many of the articles argue that schooling has a dual nature: it usually reinforces unjust social hierarchies, but it can also give young people the resources to challenge those hierarchies. Often schools do both at once, and the contact zone between schools and youth cultures thus contains both significant risk and potential reward. There is risk if educators' accounts of youth cultures lead them to stereotype or not effectively serve youth who refuse to reproduce mainstream ideals and practices. There could be reward if educators incorporate aspects of youth cultures that align with educational goals.

Most of the articles argue that youth cultures need not be opposed to educational practices and institutions. Both Alim and Winn and Behizadeh propose that schooling can take advantage of alternative literacies embedded in youth cultural practices. Alim argues that youth often respond to pedagogies that are "intimate, lived and liberatory." Educators can incorporate youth cultural practices that have these characteristics and work toward the liberatory goals that they share with many youth. Kafai and Peppler argue that youth develop creative, ethical and technical competencies while producing multimedia objects, and they suggest that educators could teach these competencies more effectively if schools engaged with such technologies and if educators positioned youth as producers of knowledge instead of as consumers of the curriculum. Both Shankar and Abu El-Haj and Bonet argue that schools could broaden their account of citizenship—moving beyond the idea of allegiance to one nation state—and help youth develop senses of belonging to multiple relevant communities, by drawing on youths' own creative connection of self to various communities.

We should not imagine, however, that some final rapprochement between youth and adult accounts is possible or desirable. It would be best if educators, policymakers and educational researchers could avoid stereotypical and deficit-based accounts of youth. It would be productive if educators could connect their pedagogy, and their civic and ethical goals for schooling, to youth cultural ideals and practices. But many youth will nonetheless continue to construe mainstream educational ideals and practices as archaic, unproductive or unjust. Youth cultures and educational practices are also heterogeneous, as Cole argues, and they change

over time. In fact, both youth cultures and educational practices should gain strength from their ability to change as ideals and social realities change—it seems, in fact, that educators might learn something from youth about productive change.

Instead of envisioning a convergence between youth and adult accounts of each other, we should shift to what Rymes calls a "repertoire" model. Educators' and youths' ideals and practices are heterogeneous sets of partly overlapping signs, ideas and activities. Any individual and any community recognizes or participates in only a subset of these, and any two individuals and communities—even if we typically oppose them, as with "youth" and "adults" or "mainstream" and "marginalized"—overlap in their repertoires. As Cole argues, we must embrace heterogeneity both descriptively and normatively. Descriptively adequate accounts of youth culture will acknowledge their heterogeneity and, as we envision more productive ways to educate youth, we should build on that heterogeneity by expecting and incorporating it. Progress will involve expanding the repertoires of both adults and youth, negotiating partial rapprochements and productive synergies in local settings, and then renegotiating as other factors intervene and repertoires change.

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About the Editor

Stanton Wortham is Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. He also has appointments in Anthropology, Communications and Folklore. His research applies techniques from linguistic anthropology to study interaction, learning and identity development in classrooms and organizations. Some of his work applies concepts and methods from linguistic anthropology to uncover social positioning in apparently neutral talk. His books *Acting out participant examples in the classroom* (John Benjamins, 1994), *Linguistic anthropology of education* (Praeger, 2003, coedited with Betsy Rymes) and *Learning identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), together with various articles and chapters, explore interrelations between the official curriculum and covert interactional patterns in classroom discourse. He has also studied interactional positioning in media discourse and autobiographical narrative, and he has developed methodological techniques for analyzing narrative, media and other everyday discourse. His book *Narratives in*

Action (Teachers College Press, 2001) offers concrete guidance on how to uncover and document meaningful patterns in transcribed talk. More recently, he has begun research in areas of the United States that have only recently become home to large numbers of Latinos. This work is represented in *Education in the New Latino Diaspora* (Ablex, 2002; coedited with Enrique Murillo and Edmund Hamann), together with various articles. This research explores the challenges and opportunities facing both Latino newcomers and host communities, in places where models of newcomers' identities and practices for dealing with them are often more fluid than in areas with longstanding Latino populations. In addition to his work on education, he has also written about learning and development within organizations, as reported in *Bullish on Uncertainty* (Cambridge University Press, 2009, with Alexandra Michel). More information about his work can be found at http://www.gse.upenn.edu/~stantonw.