Creating a Self: A Narrative and Holistic Perspective

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Abstract

The paper presents insights into the creation and re-creation of a narrative from the perspective of two female students, Phillipa and Eva, at Corktown Community High School. Corktown is an alternative high school which focuses on the development of the whole person—creative, intellectual, social, emotional, aesthetic and physical. The school is connected to the external community in significant ways, and there is an emphasis on freedom of expression, self-government, and autonomy within a collaborative work culture. Their narrative excerpts show the interconnectedness of the intellectual, imaginative, emotional, and social dimensions of their lives, and the ways in which they bring all these to bear on the creation of an identity that is true to the persons they are and to the persons they want to become. Phillipa and Eva provide insights into the realities and complexities of adolescents' lives, and the ways in which

these two young women learned to refigure the past and to engage in the ongoing process of creating new narratives for their lives in which they could be successful both personally and academically.

Introduction

Grounded in a narrative and holistic orientation to research, the paper provides insights into the creation and re-creation of a narrative from the perspective of two female students, Phillipa and Eva, at Corktown Community High School. It presents the perspectives of these two students who emphasize the importance of the development of their voices, and their ability to make connections, in order to help them to overcome their negative experiences of schooling, remaking the past, and dealing with their current and future situations. They tell of how the relationships and environment at Corktown enabled them to develop a commitment to their own learning and that of others, and to make links between the curriculum of the school and the external community. They show how the creation of an identity is always a work-in-progress that takes place in the context of the past, present, and future of the individual's life, not in isolation from others, but in a relational and contextual way. They provide insights into this process of creation and re-creation of the self, and the ways in which it has been influenced and shaped by good learning experiences, by the voices and lives of others, and their growing abilities to imagine and to create new narratives for their lives. Like most of the students at Corktown, Phillipa and Eva are "drop-outs" from other schools. Their narratives are nested within the larger narrative of the school which was studied because of its high rate of student retention, student engagement, and personal and academic success. Over 70% of Corktown's students go on to university each year: the other 30% take up mostly freelance work in the arts, media, education, social work, and the service industry. The paper has five sections:

1. Coleridge, Corktown and Creating Connections
2. Corktown Community High School: Describing the Context and the Research
3. Creating a Personal Narrative: Developing a Voice.
4. Fostering Connectedness: Connecting Self, School, and Society.
5. Creating New Narratives: Always a Work-In-Progress.

Coleridge, Corktown and Creating Connections

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, (1974, p. 326) "Frost at Midnight"

In "Frost at Midnight," Coleridge wishes that his infant son Hartley will have childhood experiences of being closely associated with nature and that through these experiences he will learn to see the interconnectedness of all things—physical, emotional, social and intellectual. The poet believes that these good experiences will be stored as stories which Hartley will use to understand his life, and to imagine, plan and create the new stories he will live out in his future life. In the last two lines of the poem, Coleridge uses the image of the silent icicles shining in the moon as a metaphor for the interplay of memory and imagination in an individual's life, and for the workings of the human mind as it recollects, projects, and creates new narratives for the future.

In these lines Coleridge balances the backward movement of his memories of his own childhood in the city where he was deprived of the beauties of nature, and saw "naught lovely but the sky and stars", with his imagined and hoped for childhood and future of his son Hartley. Associated closely with nature, seeing the landscape reflected in the clouds, and all parts of the natural world fitting together in complete harmony, he hopes that Hartley will be filled with stores of happy associations from which he can draw, as he grows into a man who has sympathy for his fellow man and an understanding of the unity of all living things.

Coleridge was an important figure in my life before I encountered the ideas, theories, and the conceptual framework on which this paper is based. I came to narrative inquiry through literature and poetry, and when I first read "Frost at Midnight" at least thirty years ago, I was struck by the power of the imagery to explain the workings of the human mind as it creates a bridge between the past, present, and future of an individual's life, and shows the connection between memory and imagination. The "seeing, remembering, projecting" mind is the central image of the poem whose movements control the poem's

shape and form by recollecting, projecting and imagining, and by using the stories we store to create new stories for our future lives.

I was continually reminded of Coleridge as I read and re-read what Phillipa, Eva, and the other students at Corktown had to say about how they learn, what matters to them as learners, and as they described the qualities of a good learning environment. They told of the importance of good learning experiences where they were engaged and challenged, of a comfortable, supportive learning environment which is connected to external communities, and of the importance of close interpersonal relationships. They also explained that it is these good experiences and supportive relationships that provide the stories and memories from which they draw to make sense of the realities of their current lives, and imagine, plan, and create the stories they can enact in their future lives.

Like most of the other students at Corktown, Phillipa, a Grade 11 student, and Eva, a first year university student and alumnus of Corktown, were drop-outs from other schools. Like the participants in Mary Catherine Bateson's (1989, p. 16) *Composing a Life*, they learned to create and recreate the narratives they could tell and enact, to "work by improvisation, discovering the shape of [their] creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined." Like the other students at Corktown, Eva and Phillipa credit the informal and caring relationships they have with teachers, the small classes, and the extended family environment there with helping them to overcome the negative experiences they had in their previous schools, to remake the past and to deal with the ongoing challenges of their current and future lives. They also explain the value of a curriculum which is relevant and engaging, the informal, conversational, nature of classes where there is an emphasis on self-expression, the development of critical and creative thinking, and the development of skills to question, to make new connections, and to continually expand and transform understandings.

In the words of Ehren, a Grade 10 student who had attended five schools prior to Corktown, who had been diagnosed and treated as learning disabled, but who was now passing all his courses, writing and giving public readings of his poetry, and planning to pursue arts studies at university:

> In previous years I haven't been as happy because of the environment I was in. It was easier to justify to myself not doing anything. Here, the environment makes all the difference.

The students at Corktown all spoke of having chosen the school because of its emphasis on the development of the whole person, freedom of expression, self-government and autonomy. They spoke of valuing the collaborative work culture which provided many

opportunities for active participation in all aspects of the school. These range from decision-making regarding the courses that would be taught in any given year, to sitting on CEASA (The Committee of Evaluation of Academic Standards and Admissions) where students deal with disciplinary matters as well as admissions. They also spoke of the value of the strong links with the external community provided by the Outreach programme and the many extra-curricular events which provide them with situations where they can learn from adults other than their parents, experiment and explore their own burgeoning interests, learn to think independently, and expand their self-awareness and the awareness of self in relation to others. These activities provide them with a variety of opportunities to develop their confidence, and to gain competence in expressing their ideas and opinions, self-determination, purpose and direction. When asked to give his opinion of an ideal high school, Gerry, a Grade 9 student, wrote the following:

> My opinion of an ideal high school would be a school that encourages and allows for creativity in its students, and tries not to treat students as if they were the 'typical' teenager, i.e. lazy, dislikes school for unimportant reasons. I think a good school listens to its students and believes that not all students hate working. A school that is unnecessarily strict in order to get students to go to school really can't work. I believe a school with a closer, friendlier environment helps students benefit from their learning.

> School should be something students enjoy and want to do or else they aren't learning, they're doing time. Courses should be a mixture of guidelines and input so that students know for themselves what it is that they are learning and why. There should also be a mixture of structure and independence because too much of one or the other does not truly prove effective.

Corktown believes that students should integrate amongst one another instead of each one building up a barrier around one's self and shying away from every activity. One of the parents at Corktown explained that in her opinion, the reasons for the success of the school in retaining students and in enabling them to be successful personally and academically, all had to do with the quality of the relationships between teachers and students and the quality of the learning environment itself. She summarized and gave four major reasons for the school's success:

- the policies and practices (show) a profound respect for young people— everything comes from that, give it and get it back
- a deep understanding of individual needs and ways to meet them.
- a strong focus in teaching kids to think independently

- a deep understanding of the creative process and (its) role in learning

Students all explained the importance of the kind of teachers who are present for students, and who acknowledge them as authors of their own lives, who help them to develop the various dimensions of their lives, and to make connections between themselves, the school community, and the larger global community. As Noddings (1984) explains, the caring teacher relates the material of the curriculum to the needs and interests of the students, and when successful, the student "may respond by free, vigorous and happy immersion in his (her) own projects" (p.181).

Classroom observations at Corktown showed the many ways in which teachers and students work together to create good learning contexts in which students make meaning of their experiences by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) explain that such a curriculum is co-created by teachers and students as they relate to each other as "people telling and retelling their histories . . . [and as] persons [who] are storytellers living out their past and remaking that past to deal with their current situation" (p. 8). Classroom observations also showed how together they create a context for educational experiences that are transformative for many students:

> Transformation learning acknowledges the inner life of the student and seeks to nurture the inner life. Education is seen as a process where the student can transform himself or herself in positive ways as well as the world he or she encounters. (Miller, 2005, p.102)

Linda, an alumnus of Corktown, explained the way teachers and students worked together to create the kind of learning environment which affected her as a student, and influenced the image of herself as a teacher which she holds and enacts in her current teaching:

> Corktown provided a really good space for me to do some very good work. When I look back at some of the things I thought and wrote about, I'm really impressed. In a women and literature course, it was really excellent, and it sort of gelled for me how to write an essay, because I felt I was learning about something that was really important. I think that's really one of the best aspects of the school. It felt like your work was important. . . . In history, we had Myrna G. and she was doing Canadian labour history for us in Grade 9. There was just so much passion involved because she loved what she was doing, but also because it felt like this is real history, this is people. This is actually a lot of work on the teacher's part

because they really have to know their stuff. That was one thing about Myrna for sure, she knew her stuff.

It seems that one of the biggest things that I've learned in this course is that teaching really has to do with the whole person. Students are not going to trust you; they're not going to work for you, unless they feel that you care a little bit. I wouldn't want to be writing for a stranger. It's like you put a piece of yourself forward whenever you write. And it's amazing that we expect people to do that all the time. Of course, they write things that are sort of taken from the introduction to the book, or they go on and on and say nothing. It is a way of masking themselves because it's really scary to say something, to actually perform and to think about something.

Linda was enrolled in a teacher education programme and teaching as a volunteer at an alternative high school which she had attended prior to Corktown. She explained that her understanding of teaching is about "teaching the whole person . . . imbued by a sense of caring. She also explains that she understands that the purpose of school writing is "to express new meanings, as distinct from repeating what has been heard from others", and that the purpose of schooling is in "teaching students how to think as differentiated from teaching them what to think". (Linda's emphasis)

Corktown: Describing the Context and the Research

Corktown: A place among the metal and the scraps:
There is a place deep among the metal and the scraps a melting pot of ideas
Clashing in a great framework a place where the elders spring from the garden
Rob is first in his medicine hat making life into art and art into life any class with
him is a "dreaded" affair an outreach jacket worn in the name of hunka hunka
burnin love to which Isadora's laughter dances in a fluttered pattern there stands
irma cool with a smoke she is guarded her mind her words her laughter
calculating the proximity of the sidewalk from the hand that holds her smoke
miles davis and alice walker would be proud to have earned her choice
admiration then greta who is the voice of passion and compassion of emotion
and beauty and reverence she speaks of toni morrison and the mother goddess
standing in the grass a happy puppy running about caroline is remembered like
the shadow of a missing limb forever her extraordinary spell woven into the walls
and last but not least margaret careful and determined she is strong and
reflective a champion of causes destined to be a saviour one day the siblings of
corktown they make it what it is the place among the metal and the scraps.

(Gerry, Grade 12 Student, Corktown Community High School)

Corktown is a publicly funded, urban, alternative high school with a student population of approximately 120 students. It was chosen as one of twenty-one schools to be studied as part of a large-scale national research study in Canada, the purpose of which was to explore and describe the meaning of the school's success. Corktown was selected because of its high rate of student retention, engagement and academic success. In the context of the selection process, community members emphasized the distinctiveness of the school, its success in meeting the varied educational needs of a unique population of students, and in graduating a large number of students with an average of over 80 per cent each year. Community members also emphasized the extent to which Corktown enables such a high proportion of its alumni to be successful in university, in college, or in their chosen careers and lives.

Nominations of schools that had a reputation for success were sent out to professional, cultural, and community organizations cross the country. Two hundred and sixty one schools were nominated, of which twenty one were chosen for the study on the basis of their success in meeting the needs of their students and communities, and in responding to the complex, varied, and often unpredictable challenges and realities they faced. These challenges included the changing societal expectations for schools, the growing movement towards accountability, the influence of technology, increasing diversity and globalization, and a changing relationship between scholarship and work. The purpose of the research was to study and describe the creative responses that these schools were making to the challenges and tensions they faced, by studying the culture and structure of their school communities, and by identifying and describing the practices which contributed to the various dimensions of each school's success. It was hoped this research would make a contribution to the improvement of secondary schools, to student retention, engagement and achievement in those schools, and to educational policy and school reform.

Research teams worked in each of these 21 schools which ranged from large to small schools, urban and rural, mainstream and alternative, over a period of a year, to conduct these qualitative studies. A mandatory requirement of the project was that the principal investigator would spend a minimum of twenty days in the school. At the end of the project, the principal researchers for each school site wrote extensive case studies which became the primary resource material for a national report (Gaskell, 1995). The approach taken to the negotiation of entry, the collection and interpretation of data, and to writing the case study is grounded in qualitative research and in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, 1990, 1988; Eisner, 1991). The full account of the case study of Corktown is presented (Beattie 1995; 2004), and the paper presented here is nested in that larger project. Corktown was the only school in the study which was specifically

grounded in a narrative and holistic orientation to the research, and which the researchers consciously came to "narratively" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The student population of approximately 120 students at Corktown is drawn from all over the city and the suburbs; the community is not geographically defined, but is defined by interests, purposes and philosophy. Most students travel to the school on various forms of public transportation, and they tell of having chosen the school because of its focus on the education of the whole person, the informal relationships between teachers and students, and because they can earn advanced level credits in an environment that is non-hierarchical, co-operative, and community oriented. These students are largely drop outs from other schools, and over 70% of them go on to university: the other 30% go to work in areas of the arts, media, education, social work and the service industry. As Corktown offers academic courses only, and the wide range of courses offered at mainstream secondary schools are not offered there, students who need some of the mandatory courses such as Music, French, Chemistry, and Physical Education have to take them at night school. Students are expected to take responsibility for their academic lives, to make a commitment to their colleagues and to the school community, and to work on understanding their roles as responsible citizens in the local and global community.

The school is housed in a two storey, red brick Victorian building in the downtown, industrial part of the city. The entrance foyer, like the rest of the school, is colourful, inviting, and aesthetically pleasing. The six classrooms have seating that is moveable, comfortable armchairs and sofas, wide window ledges with plants and flowers, and high ceilings. The school has no staff room, no music room, no science labs, and no gymnasium. It does have a large student lounge with sofas and a piano, a dark room, an outside basketball court, and a small art gallery that is open to the public.

The central distinguishing feature of this and of all the other publicly funded alternative schools in the School Board is their status as self-governing communities accountable to the Ministry of Education, the School Board, and to their own student, parent, and teacher groups. The six full time teachers and one half-time teacher teach all the courses offered each semester (as teachers do in elementary schools). The day to day work of the principal and vice-principal is carried out by two teacher-co-ordinators who take turns to do this work on a two-year basis, as the school shares a principal with the other alternative schools in the board. The disciplinary work of the school is carried out by a committee comprised of teachers and students (CEASA).

The research at Corktown began with an introductory meeting between the researchers and the teachers, and with an explanation of the narrative, shared-inquiry and collaborative nature of the research. The research team understood that participation in

the research would depend on consensus among teachers, students, and parents, and waited to find out the results of their meeting. The teachers at Corktown emphasized the importance of anonymity which they had been promised, and did not relinquish this even when the other 20 schools in the project decided to do so at the end of the project. The project also began with an open discussion of the complexities and difficulties of doing this kind of collaborative, relational research, and with teachers and students agreeing to the participatory, inquiry based, nature of the project.

The research began in the classrooms, and in the observation and discussion of teachers' practices. As the principal researcher, I spent in excess of the 20 mandatory days in the classrooms, and wrote field notes of my observations and conversations. With the other research team members, Suzanne Stiegelbauer and Margaret Robertson, we collected data for the project by conducting interviews with the teachers, school board administrators, parents, alumni, students, and community members. The data collection also included student shadowing, document analysis, and attendance at a wide range of school and extra curricular events, all of which were documented. We focussed on exploring the meaning of school success from the perspective of students, teachers, parents, alumni, community members, and administrators, and on understanding the reasons for the school's success in engaging students, retaining them to graduation, and in enabling them to be successful academically and personally.

It was acknowledged that the research would be collaborative, would involve many conversations and discussions outside the scheduled interviews and classroom observations, and that meanings would be made collaboratively. It would be:
a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up peoples' lives, both individual and social. Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

Narrative inquiry as it is used here participates in what is now a long line of qualitative research pioneered by Connelly and Clandinin (1994, 1990, 1988), Clandinin and Connelly, (2000, 1995), and set within the conceptual framework established by this research. This line of research builds on the work of Carr, 1986; Coles, 1989; Dewey, 1916, 1934, 1938a, 1938b; Eisner, 1991; Geertz, 1988, 1995; MacIntyre, 1981; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schwab, 1983; Taylor, 1989; and others. It continues and expands in the work of other researchers such as Conle, 1996, 1999, 2000; He and Phillion, 2001; and others. The research is also grounded in Miller's (2000, 1996, 1993) work on holistic education where the education of the whole person involves making connections between

linear thinking and intuition, between mind and body, among domains of knowledge, between self and community, to the earth, and between the various dimensions of the self.

The purpose of narrative research is the study of individuals' experience, and it is focussed on moving the locus of inquiry closer to the persons who are having the experience and away from a knowledge based only in researchers' observations and meaning making. A narrative researcher works to inhabit the world of another, to understand individuals in their own terms, and to understand the story which gives meaning to that individual's life. Actions and decisions are understood as individuals' narratives in action, and as the expression of their personal histories and biographies in a particular situation.

Collaborative relationships with participants are at the heart of this kind of research, and they create a context for dialogue and story-telling, sharing ideas, the mutual construction of interpretations, and the co-creation of meanings. The qualities of trust and mutual respect are essential for the kind of shared inquiry where researcher and participants engage in tentative meaning-making, and in an interpretive method which is a mutual researcher-participant reconstruction of meaning. As researchers and participants negotiate meanings and co-create understandings, they acknowledge their temporal quality, and understand that they are subject to ongoing interpretation and reconstruction. The study participates in what Eisner (1991) describes:

> as a history and tradition populated by those who have attempted to become both perceptive and articulate about what they have encountered in educational settings . . . and not only study intact settings in their 'natural state', but try to make sense of those settings through language that is not tied to formalism or to theories that abstract vivid particulars into oblivion. Each tries to tell a story that has a ring of truth without compromising figurative or interpretive language. (p.3)

It is understood that our narratives are always works in progress, open for reconsideration and re-construction, and that the stories that have formed us are what we use to continuously create and re-create our identities and the narratives of our lives. It is a liberating and life-enhancing process described by the poet Seamus Heaney as "make(ing) hope and history rhyme" (in conversation). The creation of identity is understood here in the context of the concept of a relational self –a self shaped and given meaning in the context of relations with others (Buber, 1965; Gilligan 1982; MacMurray 1961; Witherall & Noddings, 1991; and Taylor, 1989). Identity is formed in relation with others and in social contexts (Taylor, 1989; Vygotsky, 1992) where individuals make sense of what is going on by actively constructing a world around themselves. Through

dialogue, conversation and interaction with others, individuals construct their identities, know what they know, and construct new narratives for their future lives. The intersection of narratives and the influence of others' voices shape and change knowledge (Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1992) and learning, and change takes place as experience is reflected upon in the context of human interaction, and is continually modified in the light of new insights and understandings (Dewey, 1938a, 1938b).

Narrative and story are primary ways of knowing—a paradigm of meaning creation and a powerful way of making sense of experience (Bruner, 1986, Polkinghorne, 1988). It is understood that as human beings we live storied lives, and "lead storied lives on storied landscapes" Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 8). Here, narrative is understood not only as the organizing principle of experiences and actions, but of the self who experiences and acts (Carr, 1986). The issue of personal identity and of the creation of a narrative is embedded in the unity of life, the coherence of one's life story, and an individual's choice to create one kind of unity in his or her life or another. It draws on MacIntyre's (1981) concept of narrative unity and on the "concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end" (p.191). For Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the telling and retelling of stories can be understood as the enactment of Dewey's (1938) emphasis on the reconstruction of experience as educative, and the process through which growth and change take place. Human beings experience the world narratively, and education is understood as the construction of personal and social stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry therefore is seen as an appropriate way in which to research experience and to understand it from the perspective of the individual who is having the experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This philosophical and conceptual orientation to the research allows for the exploration of the meaning of students' experience as it is understood by the students themselves in the context of their unique biographies, and as it is given meaning by their past experiences, future goals, and purposes. Narrative methods allow the researcher to acknowledge the values, intentions and purposes which give these individuals' lives their meaning, and to explore the frameworks within which they make the links between intellect and imagination, between past present and future, and between self, school and society. These methods allow for students' own voices to be heard as they tell of their experiences, the ways in which they made connections and learned to re-imagine their roles, and to create and to enact new stories in their lives. The value of a narrative inquiry orientation to educational research is explained by Charles Taylor (1989, p.52) who says:

> The philosophic concern with life as narrative involves an emphasis on dialogue, conversation, story, and the processes of inquiry and reflection on experience that

allow the individual to identify what has personal significance and meaning for him or her personally. These processes help forge a vision of reality that takes account of how it was constructed in relation to others, in the context of family and community, and of the social and cultural systems that provide meaning to an individual's existence. Here theory and practice are connected and integrated in the development of the individual's voice and in the creation of a narrative quest for a better state of things. Personal meanings and understanding are made explicit and placed alongside the concepts, theories, and descriptions of practice that come from others. The narratives we tell and enact show our efforts to determine our places in the world and to direct our lives relative to the good.

Creating a Personal Narrative: Developing a Voice

Phillipa and Eva were among the students interviewed at Corktown as part of the research there. These students emphasized the importance of a learning environment where adolescents are encouraged to use their own voices to express reality as they know it, and to express their (often uninformed) ideas and understandings which provided many opportunities for them to learn to express themselves in appropriate ways. They spoke of the value of classrooms which were informal and conversational; the smallness of a school where people got to know each other; and where they were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences, to let down their guard, and be themselves. They explained that as they felt listened to and respected, they became increasingly more willing to speak openly and honestly about the difficulties they were experiencing, and to feel supported in dealing with them. They also explained that this is especially important for all students, but particularly those who have had a series of negative experiences of schools and teachers, who have dropped out of several other schools (as most of these students had), and are trying again.

The connection between the development of voice, the development of self-knowledge, and the creation of identity is shown here in Phillipa's narrative account. She tells of the importance of being "allowed to speak her mind", of "learning about herself", and of an environment that encouraged her to use her voice to become a part of the conversation and the community. Phillipa was a Grade 11 student who had attended a mainstream high school before she dropped out and came to Corktown. In her second year at the school, she was doing very well academically, making plans for university, and making a major contribution to the ongoing maintenance of the school community. Of considerable note was the contribution Phillipa had made by providing support and feedback for several female students who were experiencing difficulties. She had acted as a valuable confidante over a long period for one female student who was able to leave a negative relationship because of her help.

Phillipa

I came to this school originally because I was at a mainstream school (for a year and a week) and I hated everything about it. I was used to being in a smaller group atmosphere and having good teachers that cared about how you were doing. At my other (high school) none of that was happening. One of the guidance counsellors told me to check out this school and when I came here . . . right away, I felt comfortable. People were really friendly, and so I decided that this is where I was going to come. The students are more involved in what happens in this school, and we make a lot of decisions for the school. I think the more we're involved in it the more we benefit from the school. It helps for a lot of people who have had a hard time socially to come to this school.

Before I came to Corktown, I was always in a bad mood. I was depressed all the time. I would come home from school, have something to eat, go up to my room, spend the whole night in my room. I cried myself to sleep at nights and I never knew why. My mother and I used to fight all the time and then my whole family noticed.

When I came to this school everything changed, totally changed. I grew up a lot because you are given the chance to speak your mind here, and I wasn't at my other school. I think part of the problem at the other school is that I wasn't learning about myself at all. I wasn't finding out who I was, because I wasn't given the chance. Then I came here. There are so many opportunities that come out of this school. I've learned so much about myself and about the way I react with other people and how other people react with me. I've learned that basically I can get anything I want if I try hard enough, and that's something that I didn't believe before.

When you get out of the mainstream high school you still don't know anything about life. You know what certain people in society think you should know, but you usually don't even remember that. If I had stayed where I was, I know this sounds really morbid, but I don't think I'd be alive right now. I had so many problems I was trying to deny. When I came to this school I realized that these were people that I can trust, that cared about me, that noticed. Now I plan to go into marine biology and if I do I'll be at the University of Victoria. I went to visit a friend in Victoria and sitting on her dock being able to look at jellyfish that were just floating by, and seeing starfish everywhere, and seals coming through . . . it just amazed me. The more I started learning about it the more I wanted to do it.

Phillipa's narrative excerpt provides insights into the importance of the development of voice to the creation of identity, and the creation of a new narrative. She explains that everything changed when she was encouraged to "speak her mind." It allowed her to begin to learn about herself, about how she related to other people and they to her. By speaking out about the issues that were important to her without fear of being silenced or shunned, she developed confidence in her own voice, and in her ability to shape and to be the author of her future life. It was only when she learned that she could trust others, feel cared for, and accepted for who she was, that she could show her unguarded self, and voice the confusion, the depression, and the complexities she was experiencing.

Her narrative excerpt highlights the importance of giving adolescents the necessary time and support to deal with the negative experiences they have had in the past. These experiences affect their abilities to respect and trust the adults in their lives, and they need to experience relationships of trust and respect so that they can learn otherwise. Her words also highlight the importance of allowing adolescents to express their frustrations and negative feelings and of having them validated. As she learned to trust her voice and the ability to express herself, her identity was given meaning and shape within her interactions with others, and she began to see new ways of thinking about herself, and of her relationships with others. Phillipa explains that as she did so, she felt a renewed enthusiasm and energy, and began to make new connections between herself and the world around her. Her words provide insights into her understandings of what she needed in order to learn from her experiences to face the realities and challenges of her life and not to be defeated by them, and to discover purpose, excitement, and direction in her personal life and in her academic studies.

Like the workings of the natural world in the poem "Frost at Midnight," most of the workings of caring, interpersonal relationships and of the learning community at Corktown, take place below the surface of perception and understanding in students' lives. Though these qualities are not always observable or fully understood at an intellectual level by the students who are experiencing them, they are felt and intuited at many different levels. Most students explain that they understand them according to how they make them feel, and the responses they elicit from them. They affect their comfort levels, their willingness to participate, and their imaginative, emotional, and moral development, as well as their intellectual development. Students tell of the many ways in which they know that they are respected, and valued for who they are, and explain that they can feel the qualities of caring relationships—kindness, support, affection, respect, empathy, trust and inspiration.

Like Phillipa, many students at Corktown explained that as they were encouraged to speak about their real feelings and ideas, they felt more inclined to participate in the life of the classroom and the school, to take on responsibilities in the school community, and

to take a more active role in making positive changes in their own lives. As they built confidence and self-esteem, they also built communication skills. Then, and as they learned to express themselves in increasingly more sophisticated ways, they also began to see that their own opinions and ideas were not universally shared, to be less certain about their own ways of knowing, and more open to the voices and perspectives of others.

Some students are openly observant and reflective about the qualities of relationships and a learning environment where they can let down the defences they have built up around them, express their ideas and feelings honestly without fear of judgement and criticism, and develop their voices and their identities. Justin, an alumnus of the school, who had recently graduated as a teacher and had plans to teach in a third world country, explained the significance of these to his retention in the school, and to his personal and academic success:

> You might say that I was inspired by some of the teachers at Corktown. . . . The students build a relationship with the teacher, and from the relationship you then have a responsibility to that relationship. You want to talk to this person and to be known as a good student or whatever, those kinds of regular things. . . . Caroline was my role model. She was my advisor and she was such an inspiration. She was an incredible teacher and that's no guff. . . . She has most definitely influenced the way I view teaching and the way I am as a person. I saw in her so many great qualities that as a teacher she is who I try to live up to.

> If there's a teacher that I try to live up to, if there's a teacher that I remember, it's her for sure.

Fostering Connectedness: Connecting Self, School and Society

Eva's narrative excerpt also focuses on the importance of the development of voice, and of a sense of belonging and connectedness to the development of her identity. She explains that the development of her voice and her ability to make more significant connections between self, school and society, took place in the kind of classroom where "you can talk to teachers about things, and where teachers help students to make connections between their own interests and the curriculum." She explained that the learning environment at Corktown provides students with a lot of freedom: freedom to express ideas and opinions, even when they are dissenting or deemed to be "unacceptable" when this is done in an acceptable manner; freedom to make choices and decisions; freedom to explore one's own interests in the context of the curriculum; and freedom to be the author of one's own life. However, this freedom does not extend to the violation of the freedom of others or to the endangerment or destruction of the open, safe, trusting environment of the school. She explained that when this freedom is abused by

some students, it has a negative affect on others and on the learning environment. In her own words:

> Teachers tried to make room for all viewpoints to be shared. If there was a lot of animosity and you couldn't live with compromising and with making it work out for you, there was always CEASA.

> It isn't always cooperative and feminine at Corktown. There were lots of conflicts and arguments and challenges. There were raised voices when people felt threatened and some of these people didn't change their cynical, satirical views. Someone I knew was very capitalist and I found it very degrading.

> With politics, things move to groups; with that, it is more individual and individual differences are respected. We are a lot of individuals here and groups, but not exclusive groups and no hierarchy, even with the teachers. When this starts to happen, people make protests. It goes to a staff meeting. It goes to CEASA. Even teachers are taken to CEASA and it gets dealt with. People don't tolerate it here if you are racist, exist or homophobic, even if this is your personal opinion.

Like many other students at Corktown, Eva speaks of the value of a learning environment where she was encouraged to deal with issues in constructive ways, and where students were active members of the CEASA committee which had to deal with difficult issues on an ongoing basis. A student might make a disciplinary judgement on another student or teacher in a lunch-time CEASA meeting, and be in a class with that individual after lunch.

Eva is an alumnus of Corktown who was interviewed as part of the research when she returned to the school from her university to make a video as part of an independent study assignment for one of her courses in the first year arts programme at the university. Like many of the other students, she emphasized the value of The Outreach programme (an integral and mandatory aspect of the school curriculum) to provide her with situations in which to experience the connections between her own interests and the school curriculum, between her own life and those of others, and between herself and the wider community. It helped her to develop new capacities, social skills, and to make connections between herself, the school community, and the wider global context.

The Outreach programme takes place every Wednesday of the school year, and students choose their projects with the help of teacher-advisors, receiving support and guidance as they learn to be independent in stages. They learn to write proposals and contracts, to

communicate with prospective sponsors, to negotiate mutually beneficial contracts, and to connect these projects with the curriculum of the school. Examples of Outreach projects include working at the Food Bank, assisting a visual artist, working in a laboratory at the local university, film and video making, and working with elementary or secondary teachers in their classrooms. These projects provide students with a range of opportunities to design independent study projects where they can try on roles, explore interests and plans for their future careers, and experiment and explore at their own pace, and according to their evolving interests and levels of maturity. The Outreach programme has a guiding principle where students must engage in two self-actualizing projects for each altruistic one, and this provides them with opportunities to learn about giving back to the community that supports them, of gaining a deeper awareness of communal and societal issues, and of gaining an understanding of the importance and mutual benefits of connectedness and commitment to community. Many students explain that Outreach projects taught them to look at things from new perspectives, helped them to see themselves and others in new ways, and to come to an understanding that their ideas and ways of being are not universally shared. They also explained that in some of these situations, they were required to confront their biases, prejudices, and privileges.

Not all of these independent Outreach projects have the effect of being transformative, but many of them do enable students to develop an awareness of worlds and realities beyond their own, to see the injustices around them and to want to do something about them. For some students, these experiences enable them to see themselves in new ways and to imagine how they might make a contribution to society in ways other than they had previously imagined.

Eva's narrative excerpt shows how she made connections between her own interests and moral purposes and the school curriculum, and to come to new understandings of herself and of the interconnectedness of people and things. She tells of the value of a curriculum and a context where she "made connections to the real world, and to things that were meaningful." Her voice highlights the links between a sense of belonging and commitment to others, to the development of a commitment to both curriculum and community, and to the development of social consciousness. It also shows how the creation of identity takes place in a relational context where the connectedness she felt with the teachers at Corktown influenced and shaped her experiences there.

> *Eva*
> When I came to Corktown, Yes, I had almost dropped out and had a part-time acting job. I wanted to be connected to the real world and to do things that were meaningful. It is the connection with people that keeps you from dropping out at Corktown. This is what makes you want to come to school even if you don't go to

class. Teachers are not threatening and will talk to you about why you do not come to their class. The papers I wrote, I did many of them because I felt that I owed something to the teachers. They had done so much for me, I couldn't let them down, so I did it. I couldn't not do my independent study.

Here, everything is connected and Outreach is the key. It is so intense; you spend a lot of time here. It is inviting, you can discuss ideas, do work. Whenever I come into town, I always come back and see the people and to be in this atmosphere.

I remember sitting in a class (at Corktown) and something being said connected with things I had just done in another class, and it's all connected to the real world, and you're not just sitting in an ivory tower. Here, they are trying to teach students to put things into a context and the courses are all about reality, living in the world, living in Toronto. Corktown teaches you to have trust in yourself and to trust your judgement.

In classes (at Corktown) you can talk to teachers about things. I was in Irma's Politics class and did a project on Nicaragua. I got so connected to this, so inspired. Then one day I went into a café and they had these photographs on the walls. I said, "Oh God, this is Nicaragua." There was an advertisement on the wall also. The artist had a write up of the photos and the project and the phone number for volunteers to work there rebuilding schools. I called and went there in the summer for a month. I raised it at a student meeting, and it was accepted for the Coffee house proceeds to go to the project. I came back then for the last semester. I did a presentation about the Brigade in one class, and in OAC (Ontario Academic Credit i.e. Graduating Class) I did a paper about the murals of Nicaragua and the relationship between politics and art. It was all really connected . . . the individual parts and the incidents of my life.

Eva's narrative excerpt shows how this student made increasingly more significant connections between the subjects taught in different classes, between the school and the outside world, and between her ongoing experiences and her continuing academic life. The excerpt shows how the construction and reconstruction of her identity took place in a relational and communal context where she was encouraged to be creative and critical, and to continuously explore the interconnectedness of self, school and society. Her words tell of how her engagement with the realities of other peoples' lives, awakened her to issues and realities of which she was previously unaware. The discussions in the classroom at Corktown, the photographs on the café wall, and Eva's own reflections challenged her to enter the realities of others less fortunate than herself, to connect these to her own role, responsibilities and identity, and to create a new narrative for her life.

Drawing on her relationships within the learning community, she came to see that she had new choices in how she would enact the future of her life, and envisioned a way in which to tell and enact a new narrative of herself. Her narrative excerpt also tells of the development of her abilities to make increasingly more significant connections between her ongoing lived experiences and her academic life, and of her growing understandings of herself in the context of school and society.

Creating New Narratives: Always a Work-in-Progress

Phillipa and Eva's narrative excerpts are works-in-progress. They are temporal, and like snapshots in time which provide insights into the ways in which their narratives are continually being created and re-created as new experiences cause them to reorganize, reconstruct and transform what they know, and to transform the narratives they can tell and enact. They tell of how they learned to use their voices to express their realities, to gain self-knowledge, and to make the connections between their own lives, those of others and their roles in the creation of a just and equitable society. Their narrative excerpts tell of the influence and shaping powers of close relationships and good learning experiences in their lives which have enabled them to create the memories and stories they used to imagine, plan, and create new stories for their lives. They show how this is an ongoing process of moving away from certainties, playing with their edges of understandings, developing their imaginations, making new connections, and re-imagining the possibilities available to them.

Phillipa and Eva provide insights into the extent to which close relationships and a supportive learning environment are at the very heart of learning and teaching. They show that from the student's perspective, these are essential to the establishment of comfort levels, their willingness to participate, and to their sense of belonging. They highlight the importance of providing adolescents with a supportive context in which to express the realities of their inner lives, to have support in dealing with them, and to have these interactions with adults who do not deny the emotional work of their own lives but who model ways of speaking about it and managing it. They tell of the mainly indirect ways in which they know and feel the qualities of kindness, support, empathy and affection—and of how the sense of being trusted, respected, and valued for who they are so greatly influences their learning and their lives. They highlight the extent to which these qualities are not always observable or fully understood at an intellectual level by students, but the extent to which they are felt and intuited at so many different levels. They tell of the extent to which they affect the students' willingness to engage emotionally, morally, imaginatively, and intellectually in the school's curriculum, and affect their abilities and willingness to engage in weaving the threads of a personal identity "where hope and history (will) rhyme" (Heaney, In conversation)

These narratives are not representative lives and do not constitute a statistical sample. What is hoped for is that they do constitute interesting stories which provide insights and understandings which will echo and resonate from one life to another. As Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) says:

> We need to look at multiple lives to test and shape our own. Growing up with two talented and very different parents, I have never looked for single role models. I believe in the need for multiple models so that it is possible to weave something new from many different threads. (p.16)

The story of the school is also a work-in-progress. It too is like a snapshot-in-time of a learning community which is continually being created and re-created as each new group of students and teachers collaborate to create the community each day. Every year is different because the community members are different, and success is based on the ongoing, daily efforts of all community members. The challenges and difficulties of creating and recreating a learning environment such as this year after year cannot be underestimated. Not all students are successful at Corktown, as not all students are prepared to accept the level of commitment required to take ownership of their own learning, to play multiple roles in each others' lives, to contribute to the smooth functioning of the learning community, and to take leadership roles in the school. It also takes a special kind of teacher to be successful in a small school where six teachers must teach all subjects and play so many roles in students' lives. This kind of learning environment requires students and teachers to collaborate with each other and with parents, and for all to maintain a high level of commitment to each other and to the communal values and philosophy of the school.

Teachers and students have daily practice in adaptability, responsiveness, and reciprocality in this small school where resources are scarce, and individuals must work together in close relationships as they would in a family setting. These challenges and difficulties cannot be overlooked or underestimated. Many of the teachers speak of over-exhaustion, related health problems, and an over-commitment of time and energy to the professional part of their lives because of the multiple roles they play in students' lives. In spite of the obstacles and frustrations they experience, both teachers and students also speak of the rewards of working in close relationships over time, and getting to know each others' personalities, passions and preoccupations. Teachers also speak of knowing that the work they do can often lead to unexpected outcomes and bring about significant and often surprising effects in students' lives. They also recognize the value of being in a school where they have the flexibility to be spontaneous in their practice, to be able to seize opportunities that could help students to see situations and issues from other perspectives which could help them to come to understand worlds outside their own

experience, and enable them to envision and enact social change. They value this level of autonomy, responsibility, and spontaneity. The ongoing work of creating and re-creating a learning community such as this resembles the work of creating a good home (Noddings, 2003). Building on the work of Jane Roland Martin (1992), Noddings (2003) explains:

> The best schools should resemble the best homes. . . . The best homes provide continuity of caring relations, attend to and continuously evaluate both inferred and expressed needs, protect from harm without deliberately inflicting pain, communicate so as to develop common and individual interests, work together cooperatively, promote joy in genuine learning, guide moral and spiritual development (including the development of an uneasy conscience), contribute to the appreciation of the arts and other cultural achievements, encourage love of place and protection of the natural world, and educate for both self-understanding and group understanding. (pp. 260-261)

Phillipa and Eva tell of the importance of engaging their hearts, emotions, and imaginations as well as their intellects, in order to help them to express, explore, and transcend the limits of their past experiences, their familial, cultural and social conditioning, and to transform the narratives that they can tell and enact in their lives. Their words can help us to understand the ways in which we can create the kinds of relationships and learning communities which can be felt at many levels of awareness by students, where they can be openly reflective about their experiences and can collaborate with colleagues and teachers to connect memory and imagination, and to create new narratives for their future lives.

It is in the backward motion towards the source
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in
The tribute of the current to the source
It is this in nature we are from
It is most us.

(Robert Frost, 1950, "West Running Brook", p. 329)

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