"...Here is a place deep among the metal and the scrap a melting-pot of ideas clashing in the great framework a place where the elders spring from the garden roy 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 flattered 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 a 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 savior one day..." Gerry, Grade 12 student

Corktown Community High School

I got to know Roy, Isadora, Greta, Irma, Margaret, and the other teachers at Corktown during the time I spent there as the principal researcher in a large-scale research study of Exemplary Secondary Schools in Canada. I met them at a time when I had already been wondering about the role of voice in human development, and thinking about the importance of trusting relationships in the development of adolescents' voices.

Corktown Community High School is an alternative secondary school in the Toronto District School Board. The school is housed in a Victorian, two-storey, brick building in the heart of old industrial Toronto, and is surrounded by industrial buildings, a scrapyard, warehouses, and factories, all of which are in various stages of renovation. The six classrooms in the school are spacious with big windows and high ceilings. They are decorated with artwork, student art, maps, and posters which emphasize the human, the aesthetic, the artistic, and the communal dimensions of life in this place. The school has no staff room, no music room, no science labs, and no gymnasium. It has a large student lounge (with sofas, a piano, and a pop machine), a dark room, an art gallery which is open to the public, and a basketball court.

Corktown has an enrollment of approximately 120 students, and six teachers and one half-time teacher. It offers advanced level programs only, and the wide range of courses offered in mainstream high schools are not offered here. Students who wish to take credits in subjects not offered can take them at night school. The Outreach program is one of the most important aspects of Corktown and is an integral and mandatory part of the school curriculum. Each Wednesday, members of the school are engaged in their Outreach projects with sponsors in the community.

The central feature which distinguishes this and all the other public alternative schools from other schools in the system is their status as self-governing communities accountable to their own student, parent, and teacher groups (within the context of the policies and guidelines set by the Board). The day-to-day administrative activities of the school are dealt with by the co-ordinator/teachers who rotate every two years, and represent the off-site principal whose responsibilities include six other alternative schools.

Corktown draws its student population from all over the city. Students are attracted to the school because they have heard of a place where they can earn advanced level credits in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and co-operative "extended family" environment, a place where they will be encouraged to participate actively in the school community, to develop their consciousness about life in the larger community, and to use their voices to act in these larger arenas.

The majority of the students at Corktown have dropped out of other high schools in the city, and when they arrive most are alienated and disengaged. When they are asked about why they stay at Corktown, students speak of feeling that they are treated as worthwhile and valued persons in this school community, of a sense of
Mind, Heart & Soul

An Exemplary Secondary School

belonging, and of the value of having both rights and responsibilities in the school community. They speak of the non-confrontational, non-judgmental, and non-punitive environment as essential in enabling them to stay in school, in learning to deal with their particular human frailties and difficulties, and in enabling them to be successful in their own terms. They speak of the teacher-student relationships and of the importance of the levels of understanding, caring, empathy, patience which teachers show, explaining that it is especially this which enables them to work through difficult phases in their lives, and to learn from, rather than to be defeated by, the struggle to get to know themselves and their own humanity.

Expression of Voice

The connection of mind, heart and soul, and of voice as an instrument of the soul is explained by Philipa, a Grade 11 student at Corktown:

"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 night and I never knew why. My mother and I used to fight all the time... When I came to this school everything changed... My whole family noticed the difference. 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 and then I came here. There are so many opportunities that come out of this school. I've learned so much about myself and the way I react with other people and how other people react with me. [I've learned] that I can get anything I want if I try hard enough, and that's something I didn't believe before."

For Irma, a teacher at Corktown, the issue of the development of adolescents' voices is a focus of all her teaching, and she echoes a theme that is at the heart of the philosophy on which the school community is based; the development of the individual's own authentic voice and abilities to listen and to hear the voices of others. Irma says:

"Teenagers need to feel unique, individual, need to feel that they are their own people and [to] learn something about themselves... They need to think independently and to have respect for themselves as unique individuals."

Students are encouraged to participate actively in classrooms and in the school community, in school governance and conflict resolution, and in a school culture which emphasizes collaboration and connectedness with others, and with the wider national and global communities. It is acknowledged that when students do not have voice in the operation of schools, have no opportunities to propose curriculum changes and to participate in school governance, this results in overwhelming alienation of students from the educational system. Conversely, when students are encouraged to participate actively in all aspects of the school, they will, when it feels safe, express their inner realities, understandings, desires, fears, hopes, and dreams. When students are not afraid of being ostracized, marginalized, or silenced, they will name and describe the world as they know it, and enable others to enter their realities, to reach them and to teach them.

Teachers know that the creation of an environment where discussion and the raising of conflicting views can take place is of major importance. Difficult and controversial topics are not buried and ignored but are taken up in the context of relationships and of community where the norms of interaction emphasize respect for the other, and provide latitude and tolerance for individual expression and for the development of voice. One of the teachers, Joy, explained it this way:

"A great many students who come here have strongly individual opinions and they insist that those be heard and recognized. They don't necessarily insist on having their own way, but they insist on having their voices heard. Very often it is a voice that would be..."
The creation of an environment where discussion and the raising of conflicting views can take place is of major importance. Difficult and controversial topics are not buried and ignored but are taken up in the context of relationships and of community where the norms of interaction emphasize respect for the other, and provide latitude and tolerance for individual expression and for the development of voice.

intolerable in other places because it is a voice that is young and uncouth, and sometimes it can be rude. There is a space to let that roll by and to wait for the next stage to come forward....This school seems to be able to embrace students who are not successful in all sorts of ways....We have students whose eyes never meet yours and whose hair covers their faces and that goes on for a year and a half. Then at the end of the second year you see them emerging. We have students who can’t attend early morning classes as they are not self-disciplined or they are living alone, or they say they can’t get up in the morning. We have this method of attendance probation which seems to be more of a support than a punitive thing and we would schedule that person without a first period class....They might miss for a while but you notice that into the second year, if not sooner, people that couldn’t get to class initially would come around and manage to get there. The same thing with academic work and many, many who are not very interested, or not very disciplined, or not very skilled, just seem to gradually come around. I think this is what makes this school successful in general for all those people that it’s non-confrontational, non-judgmental, it’s non-punitive. The aim is to act supportive and nurturing and the size is small enough that that kind of energy can be retained by the staff by and large.”

Profound Respect
Seventy percent of Corktown’s graduates go on to university and the other thirty percent go into work in the arts, the media, education, social work, and the service industry. Learning to think independently, to develop one’s own opinions, ideas, and creativity requires the freedom to make many decisions and choices, and to have lots of practice in the processes of decision-making and choice-making. This kind of freedom also includes the freedom to make poor choices, to make mistakes, and to voice uninformed and unacceptable opinions in a safe environment. The teachers at Corktown strive to create this kind of environment. One of the parents describes the school’s success as being rooted in the following principles and practices:

ONE — A profound respect for young people; everything comes from that — give it and get it back.
TWO — A deep understanding of individual needs and ways to meet them.
THREE — A strong focus on teaching kids to think independently.
FOUR — A deep understanding of the creative process and its role in learning.

The adolescent’s perspective on the importance of environment is presented in the portrait of Ehren, a Grade 10 student in his first year at Corktown.

PORTRAIT OF EHREN
Ehren attended five other schools prior to coming to Corktown. At one time he was diagnosed as “learning disabled,” and was held back from classes he found interesting and challenging. Now he likes to write, and at two coffee houses held this year he read his poetry to a hushed audience. His work was applauded enthusiastically, he was confident and assured, and his spoken words belied the appearance of the written text.

Ehren is native Indian (Iroquois Nation) and his favourite subject is Drama. He has been involved with the Native community in Toronto especially in the area of Native dramatic arts, and he hopes to pursue Arts Studies at university. His mother is an actor and he comes from a family of actors. His natural father is a photographer and his step-father is an artist. Ehren explains that Tom Waits is his current favorite musician because he “likes the words.” He is a large person who has longish hair, wears Indian jewellery and double t-shirts (long sleeves, short sleeves on top) with Indian designs or slogans. His easy-going nature and personality make it hard to imagine him in trouble, but he explains that he did not like the institutional quality of larger schools and frequently got into trouble there.

Ehren’s academic record prior to Corktown would have been a serious obstacle to his hopes of attending university, but in his first year at Corktown he passed all his courses and achieved seven credits. He also ran for an executive position in the Association of Schools Councils (TASC) and subsequently decided to become actively involved in the Alternative Schools Alliance (ASA), because, in his own words: “TASC is too bureaucratic. If we are going to work with adults we should be able to express our point of view, rather than accepting what they have already laid out.” When asked about his success at Corktown, he said: “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.”

In the Current Climate
Unfortunately, some of the students who are thriving at Corktown leave because of the restrictiveness of course offerings and the necessity to go elsewhere for compulsory courses, such as Physical
MY PRACTICE
I am renewed by my ongoing contact with people who inspire and sustain me. I am also very conscious that I am affected deeply by contact with music, nature, and the sea.

Education, French, and Science. Science is particularly affected by the limitations in the budget and by the expense of the equipment and materials. Another example of a program that is affected is the Breakfast Program for students who need it. In the absence of continued community funding, the teachers agreed that they would organize shopping and baking projects in preference to shutting the program down. One teacher commented:

"The philosophy of conservation and making do with less breaks down here, and what is considered to be a good attitude towards living becomes a major disadvantage to running a school program. Recycling and scrounging take time and energy, and sometimes we can't offer a course in English because we can't get the books, and it takes time to scrounge."

Many of the teachers speak of exhaustion, related health problems, and an over-commitment to the professional part of their lives. They speak of rushed lives where a balance between the professional and the personal is not possible. For teachers and students alike, the struggle is ongoing, requiring commitment to their own learning and growth, and to the continual striving for local and global conditions of living and learning where equity and excellence are within the reach of all individuals.

Now in the current social and economic context of education in Ontario, where my colleagues in mainstream secondary schools tell me of the changes to their working conditions, and the obstacles to teaching and learning, I wondered how Corktown and the other alternative schools were faring. In the words of Sandra Best, the Co-ordinator of Alternative Schools in the Toronto District School Board, these schools are affected by all the same issues as other schools, but as she says:

"For the alternative schools, things are the same now as they've always been. We have always had to do more with less. We have never had the libraries and the computer equipment. We are used to having to strive for everything, and we use our community resources the way we always have....Yes...the changes in the context affect our situation...Teacher morale is lower than it used to be, there are the space issues, choice of principals, the removal of the principals from the teachers' unions. We deal with these issues just as other schools have to deal with them. However, there doesn't seem to be a big threat to alternative schools at present. The philosophy is the same, the cultures of the schools and the principles on which they are based is the same...we have always operated on a shoestring..."

As human beings we long to belong, and a good learning community engenders a feeling of belonging that satisfies and sustains the individual's deepest needs. The teachers and students at Corktown reinforced my belief that the ability to be successful in an academic sense is greatly enhanced when we can make connections with our own internal worlds, and reach out from there to understand others and the meanings of the world around us. From my discussions with Philipa, Ehren and the other students at Corktown, I learned about the deep necessity for this sense of belonging, especially among adolescents, and for a school culture and curriculum that enables them to make connections with each other, and with their own inner lives.

From Roy, Irina, Margaret, Joy, Greta, and Isadora, I learned that authentic human relations are at the heart of good teaching. I witnessed the value of authentic dialogue and discussion, trusting interpersonal relationships, and safe, accepting environments, in enabling adolescents to find their voices and to express their internal realities. I learned that within these relationships and environments, adolescent learners can develop their emotions, interpersonal interactions and social skills, intellectual abilities, capacities to connect with their own humanity and that of others, and to make their way in the world.

Notes
1 Corktown Community High School is a pseudonym for an alternative high school in the Toronto District School Board.
2 The teachers in this school chose anonymity so that all requests for information about the school can be channelled through the Board where qualified personnel can handle all enquiries and ensure that prospective students are matched to a school with appropriate programs, an appropriate setting, and appropriate support to meet their needs.
3 The study of Corktown was published by the Canadian Education Association as one of the cases in The Exemplary Schools Study. Individuals who wish to read this case (or any of the other 20 cases) can order it from: CEA, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, M5S 1W6.

The Toronto District School Board includes the former Toronto School Board, and the former East York, Scarborough, Etobicoke and North York School Boards. In the former Toronto School Board there were ten secondary and thirteen elementary alternative schools. The alternative schools in the other former Boards were as follows: East York: one secondary school; North York: 1K-OAC; Scarborough: two secondary and one elementary; Etobicoke: one secondary.