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**References**
The City of Toronto has the virtue of having the largest number of publically funded arts high schools of any Canadian city, and it is only second to New York in North America. In the last twenty-five years there has been a veritable explosion of specialized arts programs in secondary schools across both Canada and the United States (T. Curtis, 1987; Undercofer, 2000; Wilson, 2001). This expansion of specialized programs stands in stark contrast to the dwindling financial support for arts programs in most other schools. This disparity is often justified along two distinct lines of argument. One rationale relies on the notion that public arts high schools are preparing “talented” students to become artists in the future. Yet, while these schools are publicly funded, the public roles and responsibilities that these future artists should fulfill are not clearly articulated (Clark & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2004). A second way to justify specialized arts programs is to argue that they provide a unique approach to teaching and learning for students who thrive in a creative environment and who may not be served well by traditional schools. Yet, because entrance into these programs typically requires some sort of admission process, the logic by which students are selected typically relies on some notion of either commitment to the arts or emerging artistic talent. Regardless of the rationale, we know very little about what happens in these specialized arts programs, whether students are prepared to become artists, or whether they are there to experience a unique educational environment.

Despite the growth in numbers since the 1970s, research on these arts high schools has been sparse and typically based on single cases, focusing primarily on the “impact” of the arts in learning and documenting program success (T. Curtis, 1987; Gaskell, Binkley, Nicoll, & McLaughlin, 1995; Gore, 2007; Nathan, 2002). Although the first arts high schools were established in the 1930s, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that high schools for the arts began to sprout in cities across North America (T. Curtis, 1987; Undercofer, 1988, 2000). In the US, some of this growth was related to the emergence of “magnet” schools and other desegregation policies following civil rights legislation (Gore, 2007; Wilson, 2001). In Canada, specialized programs in the arts emerged first within the context of vocational and technical education, and later as an alternative to the education offered in traditional public schools (B. Curtis, Livingston, & Smaller, 1992). The reasons for the growth of public arts high schools are diverse and vary across different local as well as national policy contexts.
The proliferation of arts high schools has not gone unchallenged. In 1988, Undercofler invited advocates of arts high schools to address the questions being raised about these schools: “Is the expenditure merited? Do they cater to an elite minority? Is the curriculum antiquated, too narrowly focused, or focused on the wrong approach? Does the curriculum meet a need? How do arts high schools relate contextually to the larger education and arts educational communities?” (p. 43). These questions have become increasingly critical, particularly in the context of dwindling resources for the arts in education (Davis, 2005; Fowler, 1996). Despite the pervasiveness of a singular image, as portrayed in a film like *Fame*, arts high schools are as distinct from one another as they are from other schools, providing different experiences to different communities (Davis, 2001; Wilson, 2001). While few, studies of arts high schools suggest different answers to the questions articulated by Undercofler (1988), and point to the diversity in how programs have evolved, how they are implemented, what communities they serve, and with what aims. Most recently, researchers from the esteemed Project Zero at Harvard University have sought to document how the arts influence teaching and learning within the context of specialized arts high school (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sherian, 2007). Few studies of arts high schools, however, have delved into the social and cultural dynamics that influence educative experiences in the arts.

Arts education scholar Brent Wilson (2001) has argued that arts high schools can serve as models for school reform. Based on a study of four arts magnet schools in the United States he notes the peculiarities of these schools as spaces that have been organized with the express purpose of educating young artists. For instance, he observes that across these four schools, there is a focus on public assessment and engagement, rethinking discipline as related to school goals, active learning, formative evaluation, collaboration and assuming multiple roles, building community and cohesion, and integrating instruction. Wilson argues that arts magnet schools foster a climate that promotes positive attitudes toward schools and more permeable school boundaries.

Most of Wilson’s observations are consistent with other studies of individual arts high schools (Davis, 2001; Davis, 2005; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2001). A team of researchers led by Pruyne (2001) noted three overarching themes in their study of the Walnut Hill School, a private arts high school in Massachusetts, USA. Their portrait of this school illustrates how students felt encouraged to be themselves and develop a strong sense of identity. Students were given a “gift of responsibility” through a focus on what they described as a “collaborative spirit.” In a similar project using the methodology of portraiture, Gaztambide-Fernández (2001) explores the experiences of students and teachers at an urban arts high school in the city of Boston. Echoing the findings from the earlier study, he describes the “huge challenge” that students and teachers encounter when engaged in the many aspects of the work at an arts high school. A “spirit of collaboration” also permeated this urban school, and students described feeling “respected for who they were and who they wanted to be.” While these two schools seem similar in terms of the themes that emerge as resonant in this research, the particularities of each context are starkly different (Davis, 2001, 2005). Indeed, while the private school is located in a large suburban campus, the urban school reflects the specificities of that context.
Public arts high schools have tended to be located in urban settings. As Wilson (2001) notes:

magnet schools are an urban phenomenon. Only in cities do the arts-as-magnets have all of the ingredients – things such as a population base and cultural and educational resources – needed to attract a variety of types of interested students from across urban and suburban neighborhoods. (p. 376).

While the research outlined above offers some starting points for a study of urban arts high schools, little research has been done specifically on how students themselves experience such educational contexts. Indeed, while there is an abundance of information about the aims and rationales for these programs available from the schools themselves, we know very little regarding what actually happens in arts high schools, about students experiences in these schools, and what they learn about what it means to be artists. Furthermore, most available research on arts high schools is almost exclusively US-based, and there are no studies of how these schools evolve in different socio-cultural and national contexts.

The Urban Arts High Schools Project: Phase 1 – 2007-2009

Based on previous research and work experience in both private and public arts high schools, it is clear that students receive many and often contradictory messages about the role of artists in society (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández, 2001). There are at least three ways of conceptualizing the role of the artist in society based on different ways of thinking about culture (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). In different contexts, artists can be seen as (1) producers of “great works” that protect the values of the social elite, (2) inciters of a public imagination that subverts the social order, and (3) entertainers that reflect public needs and wants. These ways of thinking about the role of the artist coexist in often contradicting ways within the context of public arts high schools. Furthermore, whether and how students relate to any or all of these views intersects with other dimensions of their subjectivity, such as their identification with categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

In order to investigate these claims and develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of students in arts high schools, the long term goal of the Urban Arts High Schools Project is to consider the experiences of students in a range of specialized arts programs, with a focus on publicly funded arts high schools in the U.S. and Canada. Given the number and diversity of arts high schools, Toronto is a particularly rich context for beginning this work and developing a foundation on which to build a larger study in the future. Therefore, the first phase of this project involved conducting exploratory case studies of the various arts high schools within the TDSB. The central focus of these case studies was to write research portraits of each school, including information about the schools’ history, mission and philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy, student population and community participation, and administrative structure and services.
In collaboration with the central office of the TDSB, all six schools with specialized arts programs were invited to participate in this exploratory research. Four of the schools agreed to participate in full from the beginning of the project, and the amount and depth of the data collected at these schools was rich enough to be able to write the portraits included in this report. Data collection at these four schools began in the Fall semester of 2007 and continued staggered through the Spring of 2008. The other two schools agreed to participate in the project in the Fall of 2008, and data collection at these two schools began in December. At one of these schools, enough data was collected to write a technical report, which is also included here. At the second school, due to several scheduling and availability challenges, the data collected was sparse and not enough to complete a research report; this sixth school is not included in this report. The data for this research was collected mainly via: requests for school documents and printed materials; observations of classes and other events during school visits; and semi-structured narrative interviews with key administrators, teachers, students, and other members of the community.

Each of the reports included here is presented in the form of a research “portrait,” following the methodology developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Davis (1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), which seeks to capture a holistic sense of a school’s culture, its underlying logic as a place of learning, and an understanding of what makes the schools “good” places of learning. The methodology of portraiture is particularly apt for studies of arts programs because it draws its foundation on notions of arts-based educational research. The research portraits included here are a source to explore thematic similarities and differences and to develop questions for future research. The long-term goal of the project is to study a larger set of public arts high school in several urban regions of Canada and the US. This will constitute the first international study of urban arts high schools.

**Some Preliminary Findings**

The research conducted in Toronto pointed to three key dimensions through which ideas about the arts and what it means to be an artist are circulated and negotiated within arts high schools: program structures, the centrality of the arts, and the student body. Each of the following dimensions highlights peculiarities of public arts high schools and why they constitute an important site for research into creative practices:

- **How specialized arts programs are structured and implemented:** These programmatic structures are justified in ways that reflect different conceptions of the arts in education and how teaching and learning take place. For instance, in general, when programs are contained within larger schools, views of the arts tend to focus on notions of individual talent and commitments, while in schools where the program is school-wide, the arts are seen as integral to the learning experience. While in both contexts resource allocation is contested, inequities become more palpable when not all students are involved in the arts. These tensions, in turn, shape how teachers engage students and how students understand their own involvement in the arts. Understanding why these programs “do what they do the way they do it” would inform debates about the allocation of resources to the
education of a select group of students for the express purpose of educating them in or through the arts.

- **The centrality of the arts to the overall educational program:** This centrality brings into relief the particularities of educational experiences with the arts and how diverse students make meaning of those experiences. The ways students talk about what it means to be an artist, and whether and how they come to identify as such, are often related to their prior experiences with the arts and their social and cultural background. Direct observation of how diverse students' experiences with the arts in education intersect with other aspects of educational experience, particularly with processes of identification related to race, class, gender, and sexuality, will inform theory and practice regarding issues of identity and equity in public education and in the promotion of creative city policies at large.

- **Accessibility and the demographic diversity of the student body:** These arts programs differ in terms of student accessibility and demographic diversity along lines of racial or ethnic affiliation, immigration, or socio-economic status. Some programs serve students from mostly upper-middle class professional families, others mostly recent immigrants or students from working-class homes, while a few actually reflect the demographic diversity of the areas in which they are located. Our exploratory research suggests that the student population in any given school shapes how programs are implemented and justified as well as the kinds of experiences students describe. By exploring these differences, this research will illuminate the role that the arts might play in relationship to schooling and the future opportunities of diverse students.

Based on these three dimensions, the Urban Arts High Schools Project will continue its work exploring the following three sets of research questions: (1) How are selected urban arts high schools structured and implemented differently in different contexts? How do teachers describe and justify the work that they do within such program structures? How are different conceptions of the role of the arts in education and the purpose of specialized arts programs implied in the way teachers and administrators do and justify their work? (2) How do students from different social and cultural backgrounds describe their experiences in various types of urban arts high schools? How do they construct identifications as artists within these programs? How do they understand the role of the artist in society? (3) How do broader dynamics related to categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape how programs are structured, implemented and justified? How are these dynamics related to students’ experiences in these programs and whether and how they understand themselves as artists?

While focused on a unique educational setting, this research will inform broader debates about the arts and about the potential of youth to contribute to the creative life of the local and provincial, as well as national and global communities. At a time when resources for schools in general, and for arts programs in particular, have suffered great setbacks (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Fowler, 1996), arts high schools have flourished. The rationale for this disparity is often unclear and wrapped ambiguously between two
somewhat contradictory aims. On the one hand, some schools are committed to the notion that public arts high schools are preparing “talented” students to become artists in the future (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). On the other, some schools focus on the notion that the arts provide a particular kind of education that engages particular kinds of students better (Gore, 2007). To some extent or another, these two aims are present, either implicitly or explicitly, in the way public arts high schools justify their work (Gaztambide-Fernández & Prydatkewycz, in preparation). Yet, given issues of access and equity, whether and how these programs serve the needs and interests of diverse students remains an important question that this study will explore. Furthermore, while these schools are publicly funded, the public roles and responsibilities that these future artists should fulfill are not clearly articulated (Clark & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2004). Given limited resources and multiple demands, specialized programs struggle to strike the proper balance between specialization and a broad-based educational experience. What do students from different social and cultural backgrounds involved in these programs learn about what it means to be an artist? What is their responsibility to the public that sponsors their artistic training and education? This research will explore the strengths, challenges, and tensions that arise from offering specialized arts programs within public education systems. It will contribute to our understanding of the potential social and cultural benefits of investing in the education and training of young artists and how the complexities of social and cultural difference intersect in the context of the arts.

Report Summary

This report is composed of five case studies, each focusing on one of the five schools that participated in this project. The first four reports are presented as research portraits. Each portrait was written by one or more member(s) of the research team based on the data collected at each of the schools. The data was analyzed along four dimensions identified by Davis (Davis, 1993) as relevant to the study of educational organizations focused on the arts: learning and teaching, community, administration, and journey. Through the analysis of the data, the research team identified themes that were salient across the four relevant dimensions. Following the methodology of portraiture, the analysis sought evidence of the characteristics that make each of these schools “good.” This search for “goodness” is premised on a rejection of research models that seek to document failure or dysfunction in educational institutions. It seeks to document the complex relationship between both successes and challenges that together define any entity – person or institution – as “good.” More importantly, it seeks to gain an understanding and to honor the perspectives of those who bring life to a place such as an urban arts high school.

Portraits are also texts that invite interpretation. Most social science texts are filled with jargon and dense theoretical explorations of social phenomena, and are often dry and lack any room for the reader to interpret what is being described. In fact, one standard of traditional social science is that research should be explicit and clear so that it can be replicable, which is not possible if there is too much room for interpretation. Portraiture, as developed by sociologist and educational theorist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, embraces the idea that every reader can have her or his own interpretation of a particular text. Like an
artist painting a portrait of an individual, a portrait writer seeks to describe in detail a particular social phenomenon so that the reader can interpret those details. A portrait invites the reader to bring her own lenses to interpret what the writer is describing, and as such, a portrait invites many interpretations.

The data collected at the first four schools described in this report allowed the research team to construct nuanced and complex portraits of the school sites. This was not the case with the fifth school included in this report, where the process of data collection was less thorough because it was more complicated by time and other institutional constraints. For instance, while the researchers were able to interview almost all of the teachers working at this school, they were not able to interview enough students to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The institutional structure of the program also did not allow the researchers to observe events beyond classes, which limited their access to different settings and different kinds of experiences. Nonetheless, the research team felt that enough data was available to craft a technical report that offered an interesting analysis of the data that was collected and that raised interesting questions for future research.

Based on the five case studies and a consultation with stakeholders involved in different ways with urban arts high schools, the final section of the report outlines some of the implications that the first phase of this project raises. These implications include both reflections on the future of the kinds of programs described as well as suggestions for future research on urban arts high schools. The aim of the section is to set out a research agenda that will inform the future of the Urban Arts High Schools Project and that might guide the work of other researchers interested in this topic. As well, the goal is to point to some of the challenges that urban arts high schools face and offer possible insights for addressing these challenges. We offer these implications as a starting point for continued conversations.
Cherryhill High School for the Arts

“A caring and accepting community,” The Balancing Act, and “Transformative experiences”

LYDIA MENNA

CAR ENGINES IDLE before the traffic light of a hectic east end intersection creating a barrage of mechanistic clamoring. Hurried urban dwellers descend into the dimly lit underground train system to be transported to a multitude of destinations across the metropolitan area. The abrupt sounds and fleeting sights of this inner-city node dissipate, upon entering the gated grounds of Cherryhill High School for the Arts. A crowd of rambunctious students emerges from a nearby subway station and head toward the entranceway of the school. As the students enter the grounds, their youthful voices consume the courtyard beyond the gates, as they sing along to the melody of a popular show tune. This crooning assemblage of students splinters off, as they individually encounter fellow schoolmates, socializing within the interior of the courtyard. Students warmly greet one another with affectionate hugs, kind laughter, and shrieks of delight. This lively and fun-loving scene in many ways encapsulates the Cherryhill experience warmly recounted by students, faculty and administrators at the school.

This report offers a point of entry into the dynamics of a multifaceted school culture storied through the lived experiences of the students, teachers and administrators who generously participated in this research. The Cherryhill culture has been uniquely influenced by a programmatic shift from a vocational school to a specialized arts high school. The transformation of the school’s programmatic vision both necessitated the navigation of challenges and precipitated celebrated achievements. As Cherryhill continues to establish itself as an urban specialized arts high school it endeavors to foster a caring and accepting community, while striving to balance the various components of the program to offer students enriching and transformative experiences.

“A caring and accepting community”

Often, in describing their time at Cherryhill, or in recalling their initial impressions of the school, students relay memories of a “welcoming”, “accepting”, “caring” community that just “feels like home.” Meg Robertson, now a senior student at Cherryhill, still retains a vivid memory of an encounter that occurred during her initial weeks at the school, which left an indelible impression. Meg’s large blue eyes beam, and her full lips widen, as she reaches back in time to recount the dramatic event that took place five years earlier.
I think, well, I think, it was a couple of, a few weeks into school, and a bunch of guys from another school came, and tired to rob one of, a Cherryhill kid, and just, the whole school swarmed them. And ya, they tried to steal Principal Coleman’s camera. Ya, and just, like, kinda the whole school stood up for Mr. Coleman, and that one guy. So, ya it was my favorite [memory]. So, I guess it was kinda a big deal for me.

In recent years Meg’s experiences at Cherryhill, while perhaps less spellbinding, have continued to nurture a connection and enthusiasm for the caring community established at the school. Meg affectionately communicates her current feelings about the school community by exclaiming,

It’s awesome. I would never, ever transfer. Um, I just, I love it, like...everyone’s just friends with everyone, and it’s great. Like, everyone’s just so nice, and it’s really easy going, and people are studying what they wanna study, like, music, art, vocal, whatever, it’s what they wanna do. Oh ya, it’s just, people are happy, and you know, we go to their shows, like, music and dance shows, and we totally support our friends. And it’s really fun, ya...it’s like, it’s my home.

With a slight laugh Simone Kantar, a junior at the school, conveys similar sentiments as she refers to her time at Cherryhill as “an amazing adventure.” Simone also evokes images of caring and comfort by referring to the school as, “just, it’s, like, home.” In her view, the school culture creates:

A place [that] is more comforting to open up. Like, you can actually open up to people, and you can be friends with almost everybody, if you want to. It’s like, there’s no, I don’t, there’s, not many cliques, there’s not, like, groups of people. You can join any group you want, and be like, everybody accepts you. It’s a very accepting school. So, it’s really, wonderful.

While many students attending Cherryhill, express a connection and affection for the accepting and caring atmosphere cultivated within the school, they also note that outside observers at times voice alternate characterizations of the Cherryhill culture. For instance, visual arts major Ruby Hendrix suggests that students attending other high schools within the city often characterize Cherryhill students as somewhat unconventional or “off the wall.” Ruby candidly admits, “we’ve got a bit of a reputation with other high school students in the Board, as the crazy school ... apparently there’s a look that Cherryhill students have, like, people recognize us on the street, there’s a look.”

Ruby further attempts to articulate the Cherryhill persona, “we’re all really loud, and really rambunctious, but really friendly.” She quickly clarifies, “not loud and rambunctious in a scary way, we’re sorta, the people that will walk up to random strangers in the street, and give them hugs.” Ruby shifts her characterization back to the immediate context of the school by suggesting, “it’s just, that’s the sort of general school vibe, like... if you’re a student, and you walk into the school five people will hug you,” but she reaches out to externals views to explain, “if you see us on the street, usually you’ve got a group of about ten people, who are all singing some really loud musical theatre song, skipping. Just sort of that kind of crazy.” With a giggle, Ruby good-playfully adds, “it’s not really crazy, it’s more, like, joie de vivre.”

As the afternoon session of classes begins, the groupings of students assembled in the courtyard starts to disperse as they shuffle into the building. In the upper hallways of the school, students meander into Ms. Minoff’s class, seemingly unhurried by the sounding of the final bell, to signal the beginning of the period. As students enter the classroom they
carry with them the vivacious laughter and chatter of the hallways, which at once
invigorates the space. Students seat themselves into familiar groupings as they continue
their animated conversational exchanges.

Veronica Reed, a female student in the class, garners the interest and admiration of
several classmates, with an appearance that is reminiscent of 1950’s pin-up photos of
Bettie Page. Veronica’s bluntly bobbed hair and pallid skin tone exaggerate the severity of
her fishnet stockings, thigh-high patent boots, black bustier, and micro-mini skirt, which
flirtatiously reveals pale blue ruffled underpants. Several students and teachers at
Cherryhill make reference to such fashion statements, to illustrate the creative, expressive,
and accepting atmosphere that typifies the school.

Simone Kantar, dressed in black tights, chunky boots, and a grey scarf casually
cloaked around her neck, enters Ms. Minoff’s class, and settles into her desk. In an earlier
conversation, Simone voiced her immediate attraction to “people’s styles” at Cherryhill, and
jovially admits that now in her second year at the school she, “wear[s] tights lot more often
than...jeans.” Simone feels “inspired” by how “people express their own opinions” through
clothing choices. She explains,

well, it’s just one of those things, where you kind of go shopping, but you don’t really put on
what other people are wearing. You just kind of whatever, you are in the mood for, you pick it
up, and just buy it, and it doesn’t matter how much it is worth, or what it really looks like, it’s just
mixed colours, and do whatever you want.

Simone is not the only observer of the “Cherryhill look.” According to Ruby Hendrix,
the distinctive dress of Cherryhill students has contributed to the establishment of the
school’s reputation as a “crazy place.” Ruby, outfitted in black tights and a sliver scarf that
reflects the light as she energetically explains,

it’s just a sort of vibe we all give off. But, apparently there’s sort of, a look for the Cherryhill girls,
with the layers and layers of vintage, with, like, you know the big scarf, and everything. Like,
people recognize us on the street.

With a coy chuckle, teacher Alexandra Adams confesses, “I can pick them out on the
bus,” as she makes reference to the unique fashion choices of Cherryhill students. She views
students’ distinctive styles as expressive gestures of individuality. Ms. Adams feels, “it’s just
a different, um, look, and aesthetic. So in terms of looks, it’s easy to pick out who’s a
Cherryhill student and who isn’t.” She further attempts to clarify the “look” by
distinguishing the Cherryhill style from that of other secondary schools in the city.

Um, they [the students] don’t try to be cool, which I like. They um, and it’s not even, you know,
some arts schools there is, the uniform of unconformity. So yes, all of the guys are gonna, wear
mascara, and this look. But here, I find you can wear anything and be accepted, which I think is,
um, very unique... that you can do whatever you want here, and there is not the same types of
cliques.

Ms. Adams characterizes the style of dress at Cherryhill as “just really
individualistic.” With a quiet laugh and incredulous tone, she recalls one particular student,
who in a sense epitomizes how dress has come to be associated with the accepting and
supportive climate fostered at the school. She recounts,
I remember my first year, being really surprised, one of the most popular guys in one of my classes...He would, I think, he dressed all the time, in the same kind of clothes. And he was, it was from Value Village, and he just was very kind of strange, but he was so eccentric...So, he'd wear, a straw hat one day, the next day he'd walk in with a boom-box, on his shoulder...And he is this skinny, kinda wiry guy, that normally at other schools would be picked on, or made fun of, and here was, is, valued for his eccentricities and personality. So, I love that about this school.

Back in Ms. Minoff’s class, the teacher’s affable voice interjects to capture the attention of her class with the instruction, “class, class, I’d like to get started now.” Her calls for order do little to quiet the boisterous student exchanges that fill the space. Perhaps, in an effort to hook the attention of the students, Ms. Minoff poses an ambiguous question, “Class, something is different today, what do you notice?” The room stands silent for several seconds, until a male student enthusiastically shouts out “Oh, Veronica is here!” The room erupts with joyously kind laughter. Veronica somewhat defensively replies, “I had the flu...you can still hear it in my voice.” Trying to stem the laughter, Ms. Minoff confirms, “yes Veronica is here, but that is not what I was referring to.” Within seconds Ms. Minoff announces that the students scheduled to present their projects should begin.

As Brandon Walker, the first student presenter of the day nervously approaches the front of the class, fellow classmates perhaps sensing his hesitance, supportively chant, “Go Brandon! Go Brandon! Go Brandon!” From his position at the front of the class, Brandon dramatically flicks back his straight dark hair, encouraging his sculpted bob to cascade forward, and conceal part of his face. His high-pitched voice quivers slightly as he asks, “Can you guys think of anything from popular culture from the 1990’s?” Almost instantaneously, the right side of the class in unison excitedly sings a Spice Girls’ tune. This warm response seems to cause the tension in Brandon’s contracted shoulders to release as though signaling the alleviation of his initial anxiety. He continues by reciting, “art is not founded in time but in people – Hitler,” and proceeds to ask the class what they think the quote means. A free spirited discussion about the use of art a tool for propaganda ensues. Brandon’s face displays relief as the presentation draws to a close and his classmates caringly congratulate him on a job well done.

The supportive and encouraging attitudes conveyed in Ms. Minoff’s class are often echoed in students’ descriptions of the culture nurtured at Cherryhill. Students speak of the school as an accepting place, with a laidback, and caring atmosphere, where individuality is encouraged. Ruby Hendrix’s vibrant brown eyes narrow, as she ponders how best to communicate what she means when she refers to Cherryhill as “a school that [is] very community focused.” For her, the culture of the school has facilitated a multitude of “amazing, “engaging” and “fun” moments of learning and growth. Her lively demeanor shifts to a more pensive state as she attempts to illustrate the accepting community at Cherryhill.

Oh God, the community feel, it’s like, I don’t really know how to describe it ...but at Cherryhill bullying doesn’t happen usually, I mean there’s no homophobia, I mean, I think that half the school population is gay or bi [sic]. So, I mean, like, there’s not homophobia or anything like that. And I guess, the Principal and the teachers really just nurture this community, fostering environment, where everybody is completely supportive of each other, and where everybody helps each other out, and there’s no competition. Like, there are no competitions in the school at
all. Like, even our sports teams don’t really compete. So, there’s no competition everybody really helps each other out, and is very supportive of one another.

Ruby leans back in her chair, and expels a meditative sigh, as she considers how this “supportive community” is conveyed. She surmises that the cultivation of a supportive atmosphere at the school is due in large part to administrators’ and teachers’ expectations. As she expresses,

the fact that, we’re all expected, most, a lot of the people that come here are really nice people, who just, you know, want to do their art. But for anybody who’s not, the expectation of the school is that you will be kind to other people, and that you will not, you know, you will not tear other people down, and that you will be good to each other... So, it’s just people are expected to be kind to each other, and people will rise to the occasion, because I think the natural human inclination isn’t really to hate each other, you have to be trained to do it. So, I think because everybody is expected to be kind to each other we are.

Senior student Meg Robertson lends a further dimension to the formation the school culture. From her perspective, the flexible disposition exhibited by administrators and teachers, creates a supportive space for students to take creative risks and express themselves through various means. She speaks fondly of Principal Coleman and his contributions to the school.

Like, Principal Coleman will take any suggestion, like, you wanna learn something you’ll take it, and you know. I’m sure he talks about it at meetings with teachers, but if you wanna learn, then you will learn it. And I think that helps other kids, and you kind of have a lot of freedom with where you wanna go with art. Like, there are pretty much no boundaries.

Amidst the flurry of energetic students voices consuming the library space, Meg takes a moment to reflect, and conjure up an instance in which the flexibility afforded to a fellow student unleashed an inventive vision. Her infectious laugh precedes the telling of the tale.

Like, my best friend last year did um, a satanic ritual, in, like, a transparent box in the hallway, and, like, that’s weird, that’s weird. Ya, there’s, like, no boundaries. That’s what he wanted to do. And, he was graded on a rubric, and if it matched the rubric, he got a good mark, if not, you know. He did what he wanted to do. Ya, like, it wasn’t like, no you can’t do that because. Ya, that’s what he wanted to do so.

The warm and affectionate accounts of students’ experiences at Cherryhill serve to illuminate fundamental components of the established environment. However, the identification of sites of differences, while seldom voiced, point to the complexity of a school’s culture. For teacher Alexandra Adams, the caring and laid back atmosphere at Cherryhill is a “good fit,” but she also notes: “you don’t tend to find a lot of ethnicities here.” Ms. Adams’ pensive gaze conveys an internal complexity long before she cautiously admits, “I think the students would benefit from seeing more racial diversity.”

Amara Gariba, a senior student at Cherryhill, also appreciates the “open-minded” and “helpful” atmosphere of the school, while simultaneously voicing significant differences between her high school and elementary school contexts. With a wide grin she declares being a Cherryhill student, “it’s pretty awesome.” However, in her soft-spoken tone of voice, Amara also observes that her elementary school “was a lot more, like, hip-hop, like, more
we had a lot of black students, we did have, like, other culture students as well [sic], but it was more of, the urban hip-hop kind of culture.” Her expressive eyes reflect great depth as she considers how the composition of Cherryhill is quite different from her past school experiences,

our school [Cherryhill] is, mainly based on white, middle class kids, students. I’ve noticed that, I mean being a black person in this school you notice that sometimes I’m the only black kid in my, most of my classes actually. So, I don’t really notice, cuz, I don’t look at it that way. Sometimes when you, you talk about things that involve these things, you kinda look around, and like, “huh, I’m the only black student in this class, that’s kinda weird.” But at the same time, um, when I say multicultural as in, the, a way of life, culture kind of a way, not as in you are Black, or White, or Asian, or in that kind of way. Cuz we don’t really, any, like, we have a couple Asians, we have a small group of Black people, and the rest is just white middle class students.

Moments pass as Amara contemplates her experience as a student of colour at Cherryhill. Her receptive body language and calm presence communicate an openness that is echoed in her candid responses. Amara further lowers the gentle tone of her voice to confide, “um, honestly, that doesn’t really bother me, or matter to me at all. Cuz, personally I don’t really, look at myself, as a Black, or White, I look at myself as a, as a, human being, that’s just part of society. If you want to look at me as a Black person, that’s fine by me, cuz I am, you know what I mean.” She further explains,

I get a lot of just, uh, I mean, questions … it’s crazy, and sometimes, I will explain as much as I can, I’m not, like, an expert on it, but I try to explain, if I can. It’s kinda weird cuz, a lot of students, don’t automatically judge me, they ask me why this is it, … or why if you’re Black this is, this, and I try and explain as much as I can. But I don’t really try, and look at myself, or anyone else in, cuz of their colour, religion, or culture, or anything, like, that. So, it doesn’t really matter to me if I go to a school where I have, fifty Black kids, …or whatever. It doesn’t really matter to me.

The Balancing Act

The main administrative office is abuzz with activity as the staff prepare for the beginning of first period. The small visitor reception space offers two wood framed vinyl upholstered chairs, positioned in front of a series of built-in vertical wooden mail slots, which harkens back to the buildings 1960’s architectural roots. Faculty flow in and out of the main office, warmly greeting administrative staff as they dart in to retrieve memos and paperwork from the personalized mail-slots, neatly labeled with the first initial and surname of each teacher.

Three sign-up sheets advertising faculty professional development sessions on “Wellness and Stress,” “Team Building,” and an “E-learning Institute,” are affixed to a pale grey laminate surface resting atop a tall counter that forms a boundary between visitors and office staff. Of the three sessions available, the “Wellness and Stress” workshop has the monopoly on participants, with twenty-one faculty signatures. The bordering walls on either end display bulletin boards with various notices, the Maclean’s magazine school rankings, and an enlarged map geographically defining each of the schools within the district board.
The door to the adjacent office of Principal Don Coleman stands open, greeting students, faculty, and parents to drop in and share a word. A collection of traditional brass school bells is neatly displayed on a side table. "Arts minded high school a catalyst for student creativity," declares the headline of a framed newspaper article hanging above the side table. Accompanying the headline is a photograph of Principal Coleman sporting a grin from ear to ear.

The large window in the office overlooks the tree-lined courtyard at the front of the school. Settling into his chair, Principal Coleman proudly highlights the fact that at Cherryhill High School for the Arts student auditions do not form part of the admission selection criteria. He comments "no auditions, more access" and explains the school's philosophy is inclusive, as admission to the arts high school is not contingent on prior experience, often acquired through costly private lessons and extracurricular training.

The words "passion" and "joy" are peppered throughout Principal Coleman's description of a typical student experience at Cherryhill. The school, he explains with intensity, is "just a joyful place to be" in which "every kid in the program is in the arts ... it generates a culture that is committed to the arts ... there is no other option in the building – either you are in the arts or not." He vividly recounts a school community inhabited by lively, imaginative, enthusiastic students with a "passion" for their artistic endeavors. The culture of the school has created "an attitude in the building where no one would blink at a kid dancing in the halls."

The dedicated arts and non-art faculty at Cherryhill, many of whom are artists with an active practice outside of school, are an integral part of school community. Principal Coleman observes, “staff are excited because they are the creators [of the program] this has released incredible energy." “Cross-departmental pollination” is the term he uses to emphasize that both arts and non-arts “staff are integrated in the way they work together.” He indicates that all teachers are supportive of the arts and cites teachers’ efforts to routinely accommodate students’ rigorous performance schedules as evidence, while simultaneously acknowledging “it drives them crazy some times”.

Ellie Barnes, a teacher who has worked with a variety of students over several years of teaching at Cherryhill, echoes the sentiments of Principal Coleman. Ms. Barnes suggests the admissions philosophy of the school is distinct and fosters an inclusive environment:

keeping that philosophy of it’s [the arts is] for everyone ... that’s why we don’t audition ... so they come to us mostly as beginners ... we don’t accept based purely on talent. We look at profiles, and we look at their interests, and we take risks with a lot of kids, and they have to want to be here, they have to want to try and do the arts ... our philosophy remained to be an open access school, where kids who really show an interest, and work hard can do it.

The foyer and hallway directly outside of the main office reverberate with the footsteps of students trickling into the building to begin their school day. Principal Coleman emerges from the main office with a brass school bell, carefully selected from the collection he has amassed. As the door to the foyer swings open the resounding tone of the bell floods the hallways. His morning ritual of manually ringing a traditional school bell to signal the
start of the day has become legendary among parents, students, and staff and is often referenced as a symbol of the nurturing and caring atmosphere of the school.

Cherryhill senior Nick Arturi, a high-spirited and outgoing student, is “passionate” and devoted to his arts practice. As he explains, “I try to do as much as I can at this school, I try to push myself to, like, being the best like, art student that I can be”. His tall frame and conspicuously long limbs register restlessness, as he frequently shifts postures. Nick expresses concern that some “people here now are not in it really for the art ... I don’t know, they just don’t seem motivated ... and I think when they do start to care in life it is very late in the game ... I would like for it to be more like, selective.” Nick seems to comprehend the complexity of trying to balance the school’s inclusive admissions philosophy with the programmatic goal of advancing a rigorous arts and non-arts program. He struggles to come to some resolution on the issue as he relays his internal debate and contemplation of the school’s admissions process:

then again, if there was an audition, I probably would, never would have gotten into this school. I don’t know like, I think a school, like, a high school most certainly is there to shape you, and you are not the same as who you are when you start high school. So that way an audition would not really work. It would just be people ... like, have their parents like, pay for extra training when they were younger so that they could stand up like that. I don’t know, but I wish like, there was a way that they could find the people who were motivated.

Students shuffle about the halls making their way to stairwells, classrooms, and studio spaces. Across the hall from the main office the library is alive with boisterous student voices. The library space is a constant hub of activity. Increased enrollment in recent years, nearly doubling the size of the student body, has placed a strain on the library, which is one of the only centralized gathering places in the building accessible to students all day. The librarian interacts with students in a welcoming and laid-back manner. As a student approaches the reference desk to sign out some photography books, the pitch of his voice peaks with genuine interest as he asks, “What project are you working on this week Kim?”

The circular tables positioned in the centre of the library, each seem to represent a microcosm of youth culture, as students engage in lively recounts of weekend escapades and provocative cell phone conversations. “This is going to be the event of our generation,” declares Tianna Harper excitedly from her seat at a rambunctious table of students synchronizing the outfits they plan to wear for an upcoming night of revelry. As her shrieks of enthusiasm rise well above the level typically accepted in a library, the librarian gently admonishes, “Tianna please”.

Students move unfretted throughout the library space warmly interacting with the librarians and fellow classmates. David Izzard, a senior student, shifts and angles a guitar case in one hand, a horned instrument case in the other hand, and an overloaded messenger bag slung across his shoulder, to awkwardly maneuver the metal turnstile guarding the entrance to the library. His boyish face and clear blue eyes project the naïve optimism often associated with youth. David, dressed in fitted blue jeans and a grey hooded track-jacket, exemplifies the causal trappings popular with the majority of male students at the school. His squarely positioned eight-panel hat, pieced together with swatches of tweed suiting fabric, further typifies a fashion accessory adopted by the school’s many music
students. Often at the school’s public concerts, the young musicians performing on stage are clad in a variety of fedoras hats, flat caps, and toques, starkly denoting the absence of traditional performance attire.

David describes the school as a place with a “vibrant atmosphere and people that are really friendly.” He admires the willingness of teachers to “work with you, they’ll really explain things to you ... they’ll explain why you need to learn something, and how you can use it later in life ... instead of just saying do this, and get these marks.” David believes his involvement with the Cherryhill arts program has provided the opportunity to cultivate a “passion” for his musical practice, and has propelled him to engage in various arts commitments, both within and beyond the school. However, he also expresses the challenge of trying to balance commitments in the arts, school assignments and extracurricular activities:

> It’s really hard to balance the arts with doing well in academics, and I don’t know, I kind of balance it pretty well, but often times, two or three times a week, I’ll be coming home at ten o’clock ’cause I have a practice ... I have to go to another practice, and then I have to get my homework done for the next day. So I don’t sleep a lot, that’s kinda what suffers ... I don’t know, it’s odd balancing academics with arts.

Faculty members at Cherryhill varyingly respond to students’ perceived struggles to balance their arts and non-arts commitments. Stella Warner, a teacher at the school, knows the experience of an arts high school student first hand. With strikingly precise diction she voices empathy for students striving to accomplish the balancing act. Ms. Warner vibrant draws on her past arts studies to offer notes of support to her students. “I know what it was like to go through all of those shows, and be involved outside of school in things, and trying to achieve ... that balance in your life ... I understand the stresses or ... how great [it] feels, because that’s how I felt when I would finish a show.”

Her intonation turns solemn as she offers a counterpoint on the student experience at Cherryhill suggesting, “here I believe that there is a balance, but also sometimes it gets a little out of control, and it is hard to get the kids to understand that balance, especially when a lot of pressures are being put on them with the grades, with their arts.” In an effort to awaken students to the reality of life circumstances she advises, “yes, you have this to do, yes, you have that performance, but you’ve got to learn how to prioritize, and prioritizing doesn’t mean your academics come first, it means schedule yourself, learn how to do that.”

Ms. Warner’s wisdom resonates with Simone Kantar, a junior student, whose serene and relaxed demeanor is untroubled by the animated surrounding of the library. The loose ponytail casually holding back her long chestnut locks mirrors the laid back presence she radiates. Black tights and fitted jersey pullover compliment the lean physique she has spent countless hours toning through a dedicated dance practice. Simone believes, “it just disciplines you...you just learn to manage your time, and you learn to wake up on time, and be everywhere, and be involved, and go to class, and actually have to pay attention.”

The morning is getting off to a slow start in Robert Graydon’s art class, with only he and two of his female students in attendance several minutes after first period has officially commenced. As students casually stagger into the classroom, Mr. Graydon in good-humor
warns them, “I’ll give you a grace day for being late because of the snowy weather conditions,” even though attendance issues in the class have become a routine practice. Winter weather conditions aside, on occasion both teachers and students have expressed concerns with the image of an “artist” as “slow moving” and “lax,” which permeates throughout segments of the student body. Mr. Graydon suggests he often reminds his students that becoming an artist is a process that involves a lot of “working long, and hard” through several years of dedicated practice. Once the majority of the class arrives, students prepare to present their work for critique. Mr. Graydon grounds the critique in questions that engage the students in a discussion of their process, thematic explorations, artistic decisions, inspirations, and references to art theory and practice.

As an artist with an active professional practice beyond the classroom, Mr. Graydon recognizes the difficulty of trying to achieve a balance between the long hours he dedicates to his teaching practice, and the time intensive requirements of creating and publicly exhibiting his artwork. Mr. Graydon refers to it as, “part and parcel of the challenge of balancing school, and things that are outside of school…at this point, I think, I do provide a realistic example for students of what a practicing artist looks like.”

Fellow teacher Ellie Banks has also wrestled with the demands of negotiating her dedication to both a teaching and active arts practice. As she clarifies, “my days are long because I work extra with kids, I’m with them here after school many nights a week, in the morning, and at lunch so it’s difficult.” Ms. Banks’ firm commitment seems to be grounded in her belief that “really art is about the human being, and what we have to say inside, so we’re reaching kids through the arts, and that is satisfying but it is hard to do.” Throughout her time at the school, she all too clearly understands the toll of such demanding work as she concedes, “I know why people get burnt out doing that because it’s hard, it’s hard on your soul, it’s hard on your spirit, it’s hard physically, and emotionally.”

In the opposite wing of the school building, which houses the “non-arts” classrooms, teacher Sidney Proctor energetically connects superheroes, movie references, and an animated film into the day’s lesson. Students thoroughly enjoy the video, laughing out loud in unison in all the appropriate places, as though on cue. Throughout the lesson the teacher’s soothing voice sporadically inserts humorous, but relevant anecdotes, which elicit affectionate grins and chuckles from students.

Flashing a warm smile Sydney Proctor playfully pronounces, “be prepared to be awed.” A male student, with straight chin-length brown hair and a meticulously manicured goatee, who from his seat in the second row has continuously maintained a concentrated gaze on his teacher, now enthusiastically exclaims, “I have been waiting for this!” The teacher’s striking eyes light up, as a popular culture reference is once again drawn upon to weave a tale of how “Denise the Menace’s Physics Mom” instinctively calculates the accurate mass, and number of toy blocks contained in a box. This oration is met by a joyous outburst of laughter as students keenly attend to the lighthearted tale.

Periodic distractions surface throughout the sequence of the lesson. For instance, one of the male students in the class feels compelled to disclose to a classmate, “dude my Mom cleaned my room and now I can’t find anything.” Each time, Sydney Proctor easily gets the class back on track with a serene “ssssh,” which washes a sense of calm over the
class, and effectively silences the amiable disruptions. As the bell sounds to denote the end of the period, Mr. Proctor reminds students to start studying for their impending test and that he will be available both before and after school to assist them.

Faculty at Cherryhill also point to the complexity and challenge of striving to maintain the “non-arts” programs within a specialized arts context. Teachers indicate achieving this balance is difficult because the majority of the students are attracted to the specialized arts focus of the school, and not the “non-arts” courses. Spencer Baird, a teacher at the school, is forthright in the observation that:

I think the problem is making sure that enough focus is paid to the academic courses, especially math and science ‘cause let’s be honest, that’s not what the kids are interested in, but I think it’s important to maintain, a level that’s appropriate, based on the fact that we are offering the same academic courses as any other high school.

With a furrowed brow and intensified tone of voice Spencer conveys the belief that, “no, I don’t think it’s balanced … overall school activities and decision making does slant toward the arts.” While this teacher realizes these conditions are to be expected given the specialized context of the school’s program he/she does not allow this appreciation to diminish the concern under discussion. Spencer caringly communicates, “I understand that it is a school of the arts, but I really think some more attention needs to be paid to academics, and really the importance of academic subjects, in teaching students the skills they need to succeed in arts, such as a work ethic and organization”.

“Transformative experiences”

With classes in session the conspicuously empty and quiet hallways accentuate the physical structure of Cherryhill High School for the Arts. While the building has undergone renovations, remnants of its vocational school history are interspersed throughout the various retrofitted spaces, which now accommodate the specialized arts program. The palpable scent of pubescent perspiration that lingers in the air announces the presence of the converted fitness centre long before reaching the actual entrance. A notable staleness dominates the corridor, while the industrial corrugated metal ceilings and protruding ventilation hardware echo traces of the space’s previous incarnation as a dry cleaning workshop.

Principal Coleman adopts a relaxed posture as he rests his arms atop the supports of his office chair and stretches out his legs. He recounts the gradual transformation of the physical space of the school from a vocational program “full of auto-shops, small engine shops, dry cleaning shops, hospitality areas, and woodworking, framing places,” to a structure that now houses “drama studios,” “a beautiful art area,” and an “upgraded auditorium with improved lighting, and sound,” to support the specialized arts focus of Cherryhill. Drawing on his numerous years of service, he explains that his early years with the school were “very challenging” as the reputation of the vocational school was in a state of decline.
His voice intensifies as he recollects a motivating factor behind his lobbying for a specialized arts high school stemmed from his belief that “the city should have an arts school in the city, not just in the suburbs.” He also quickly acknowledges the crucial support of the school’s enthusiastic parents in the ultimate establishment of a specialized arts program. Principal Coleman appreciatively recalls the support of a small group of “very dedicated” parents who helped him put together the model for the arts school.

However, plans to transform the programmatic structure of the school into a specialized arts high school were met with some initial resistance by the District Board. In his view, the Board’s opposition “may have been influenced by the fact that [the four arts schools in the Board] audition their students and select them very carefully... and they cater to a fairly well off community that has been able to provide private lesson support for their sons or daughters.” In his view, a vestige of the school’s former incarnation has been retained with Cherryhill’s “inclusive philosophy.” He notes,

what we have hung onto, from the de-streamed philosophy, which was here from the beginning, is our attempt to be inclusive. So, of the four arts programs in the District School Board, we are the only one that does not audition, and we do that explicitly, so that we don’t exclude kids that don’t have a privileged background, haven’t had private lessons.

As Principal Coleman’s reminiscence winds to a close, his unfailingly composed demeanor and steady tone of voice, cannot mask the pride that infuses his recounting of the “leap of faith” taken to create Cherryhill High School for the Arts. Perhaps realizing that no oral history would be complete without a nod to the “risks” encountered along any circuitous path, he points to the “cost” and “risk” associated with transforming a school’s culture. His administrative proclivity emerges as he relays how the “initial intake” of students “that came for the [arts] package...went down” and further asserts, “it was a risk we had to take to begin to get a clear group, who were here for the arts.”

Principal Coleman notes that over the course of several years, as the arts program established a reputation, “we did begin to attract some more students ... and then we had just [to] grow the population. So now we are over one thousand.” As the formation of the school’s specialized arts structure began to take shape the culture of the school was further transformed by the influx of students and teachers attracted to the arts focus. The shift in programmatic vision initiated a change in the school climate and the composition of the student body.

Layla Davis, a grade nine student, speaks with confidence as she characterizes the school, “a really good environment for kids who are um, like, different from a lot of people either in the way they dress or their sexuality ... like Cherryhill, like, people like accept, are more accepting of, like anything.” After a brief pause she adds, “although a lot of people, when they come to our school, they’re like ‘there’s no black kids here’ which when you look around it’s almost true, there’s like eighty percent white girls. So it’s odd that way.”

Seated at one of the circular tables in the library, she firmly plants her feet on the floor and leans forward to rest her elbows on the veneer surface to ponder the composition of the student body at Cherryhill. She recalls the description that a now retired teacher shared with her about the school prior to the arts program, “before it was an arts high school there were a lot more, um, black kids and like Indian kids and, um, just a lot more
ethnicities in the school. But then, when it changed into an art school, I don't know, it attracted more kind of upper class, white kids.”

Layla pauses frequently as she attempts to articulate her thoughts on the demographics of the student population at Cherryhill. With some hesitation she explains,

I don’t know, I’m not really sure, but I’m guessing that it’s probably just because um, [pause] yeah probably just because once it became an art school it attracted, or it appealed to more um, more kids further away and, like, ‘cause down, down here used to be, like, there used to be, like, a large black community. Um, and now it’s more, like, the arts, um, has a, the arts programs um, have appealed to, like, kids all around the city.

Junior Arden Phair has only been at the school for a short time, yet her lower lip piercing and indigo beret worn slightly askew signal her awareness of the stylistic practices typical of Cherryhill. Arden notes the unique gender dynamic that seems to have manifested alongside the establishment of the school’s arts focus. With a chuckle she comments, “the guy to girl ratio is really uneven. It’s, like, three girls to a guy, or something like that.” As a consequence she wonders if the school is “more intimidating for girls, ‘cause they’re so many of them.” While she suggests this “doesn’t really make a huge impact,” she reiterates “it’s kind of weird just like seeing all these girls, and just, like, so few guys.”

Principal Coleman also acknowledges that the composition of teachers changed as the school shed its vocational function to embody a specialized arts model. The process of securing teachers to participate in the creation of the specialized arts model was cultivated over time. He admits the challenge of recruiting teachers “while frustrating, has also been very healthy because it’s the people that are here, built what’s here and so, have a deep commitment to it.” He proudly acknowledges, “they work hard ... non-stop performance ... wonderful energy” and accentuates “there are high expectations for the kids in all the areas, not just the arts ... we aren't preparing artists, but some will go that route, but along with those high expectations.”

The shift in the school’s programmatic vision also attracted teachers with arts expertise and a strong commitment to the arts. Principal Coleman emphasizes that many teachers “are in their own right practicing, either dancers, choreographers, artists, that brings a different perspective.” For Don Coleman, the commitment of arts teachers to both their teaching and their work as artists, has been important “because the expectations of both kids and parents here, is that they’re getting something extra.”

Arts teacher Ellie Barnes, retreats to her narrow office situated along the wide hallway leading to the open studio space, in the hopes of stealing a few moments at the end of the school day to attend to the administrative aspects of her work. As she wraps up arrangements for an upcoming event at the school, fragments of her telephone conversation trickle out of the cramped office, teeming with files and video-tapes. After completing her telephone task, she shifts focus to consider the experience of teaching at Cherryhill.

She conveys a definite sense of confidence when speaking and reflecting on this topic. Ms Barnes admits, “it’s been hard,” referring to her many years of passionate commitment to arts teaching, but in the same breath astutely clarifies, “I’ve seen lives
transformed through the arts, and through the hard work that we do with these kids.” From her perspective, arts teaching is intensely implicated in students’ transformative experiences “because they think that somebody cares about them, they know that somebody cares about them, and somebody cares about our world, and somebody cares about the art form, and teaches them respect for the world, and themselves, through the art form.” She self-assuredly reiterates, “I have seen lives transformed in front of my eyes,” as though affirming her ardent commitment to arts teaching at Cherryhill.

Ms. Barnes suggests that students’ transformative experiences are in part due to the fact that “they’re learning about, the lifestyle, the culture, it touches them in a different way, all the productions they do, it’s hard once it gets in your blood.” The performative dimension of the arts program seems to play a vital role in the students’ transformative journeys. Ellie attempts to illustrate her conjectures by drawing on a recent example. “We just did our [performance] workshop and they’re definitely artists, they have something to say … they had their own individual voice … it’s a journey.”

Teacher Katherine Fletcher echoes similar sentiments. She refers to the witnessing a former student’s “transformation,” elicited by his participation in an arts production, as one of her “most memorable moments” at the school. Katherine explains, “the student … was a kid that was pretty isolated, he just really got along with adults, when he first came.” She further describes the challenge he faced as a “a person of, um, mixed culture and colour, in an institution that, wasn’t as multicultural as some other schools [in the city] are,” but “that [production] transformed him.” With a smile she warmly recalls the award bestowed upon the student by the school community in acknowledgment of this “transformative” experience. As Katherine recounts,

> he ended up with, we have something that the parents’ created called the Coleman Awards for students who’s lives have been changed through the arts over the four years that they have been here, ... and over that time it was that [production], even though he was a good actor always, and he always got roles, but it was there that he found his friends, and his way of kind of pulling people together.

Senior student Meg Robertson credits her personal and artistic evolution to the nurturing environment at Cherryhill. As Meg enters one of the visual arts studios, her high rubber rain boots embellished with white polka dots hint to a whimsical disposition. Her clear blue eyes broaden as she reflects upon her time at Cherryhill. “I think, it’s more, how far I’ve come since grade nine.” Meg explains, “it’s more how much I’ve grown with visual art … now it’s like, I’m just doing everything, graphic designing, and fashion, and visual, and I love it.” She pauses to assess the many facets of her artistic journey and growth. With a gracious smile Meg confides, “I guess they make it, like, feel totally safe. This is my safety net. Like, I come here and it’s just … like, I leave my issues at the door. I think everyone else does too.”

Meg pulls from her early years at Cherryhill to share a transformative adolescent experience, “when I first came in grade nine, I used to be, like, a real gangster kid, and there was a lot of really, like, gangster kids around, and that’s when the fighting would go on, but they left the next year, grade ten, and I stayed, and I kinda grew out of it.” She has observed similar patterns of change in the succeeding cohorts of grade nine students, and credits the conversion to the laidback, supportive community established at Cherryhill. Meg notes,
so many kids change. Like, kids that come that are, like, gangster become, like, all earthy and hippie, and like, um, people just totally change, like, anyone who I see the first day of grade nine, and they’re all, like, done up really well, with like, tons of makeup, and heels. I’m like, they’re not gonna be like that next year, first day. No, not a chance, like, everyone just totally gets more laid back, and people just come to school in running shoes, and rain boots, and um, you know.

Senior student Georgia Rudd sits at one of the oversized tables in the visual arts studio. A mass of colored pencils are strewn beside her, as she sketches a comic book inspired female character with short spiky purple and blue hair. Several other stylized female figures are sketched lightly in pencil beside the protagonist.

While speaking about her experience at the school, she persistently plays with her large star shaped drop-earrings, causing them to glitter in the reflected light. Georgia discloses, “Cherryhill has done, like, wonders for me. Since I’ve been here I’m a completely different person than I was at my other schools.” She elaborates, “I feel, like, a lot more secure, and like, I have a healthier lifestyle. And um, I’m, I, work harder because I’m enjoying what I’m doing.” Georgia is quite striking in appearance, with an intense gaze that is accentuated by the application of smoky eye shadow. She exudes a self-assured, but unpretentious air. She further professes, “Cherryhill, helped me become, like, a better person on a bunch of different levels, like, academically, artistically definitely. And I dunno, like, interpersonally, and like, just personally.”

Georgia expels a dramatic sigh, before proceeding to the highlight the contributions of the teachers at Cherryhill, to her development as an artist. She explains that, "the teaching method is different. Here we get to come up with our own assignments a lot of the time, which is really good because you can explore what you’re interested in.” Georgia suggests the flexibility afforded to students mirrors the experience of an artist. ”I mean as an artist that’s what you’re doing. You’re not, you’re, like, adding onto something, and you need to learn about that, and they teach you that, but it also helps you to, like, develop your personal creative side.”

Hang on to your hat!

Outside the sturdy wooden auditorium doors, parent volunteers are stationed behind long rectangular tables diligently selling concessions. The industrious ventures of the Parents’ Arts Committee simultaneously satiate the attendees of the evening’s featured performance, while raising funds for the school’s arts programs. The surface of the concession table is lined with a slew of chocolate bars, gummy candies, bags of potatoes chips, and cans of fizzy soda, tempting spectators to indulge in a sweet fix. A lone basket of shiny red apples stands conspicuously out of place alongside the more delectably saccharine treats. The addition of this healthy alternative does little to sway purchasers, as potato chips hold the reign as the top-seller of the evening. The parent volunteers congeniality and their shared knowledge of the school culture is evident as they excitedly reference teachers by first name and students’ according to their area of artistic expertise.
The alluring melodies of the performance seep through the cracks of the auditorium doors inviting those waiting outside for a chance to enter. A group of adolescent males, sporting black and grey fedora hats, stand by the doors anxiously awaiting their chance to see the Cherryhill Jazz and R&B student concert inside the auditorium. One of them dances frenetically on the spot anticipating the jovial atmosphere inside the auditorium. When the sudden eruption of applause signals a pause in the performance, the weighty doors open, and the boisterous group of adolescents rush through the doors and disappear into the darkened auditorium.

The auditorium is filled to capacity with an audience of supportive parents, young siblings, and student peers caringly cheering on the Cherryhill musicians. An energetic toddler, perhaps one of the evening’s youngest fans, happily sings and sways in the aisle. As a glaring spotlight pans the crowd, notable stylistic trappings such as thick boldly coloured eyeglass frames, supple leather jackets, chic angular haircuts, and fastidiously trimmed goatees, seem ubiquitous among the parents in the audience.

The student orchestra assembles amidst welcoming claps and joyful roars of anticipation. The young musicians are casually dressed in a mix of jeans, t-shirts, running shoes, tights, and UGGS boots, starkly denoting the absence of any formal performance attire. Each member of the orchestra is also wearing a distinctive hat, the unofficial yet indispensable trademark of most student musicians at Cherryhill. This expansive collection of toques, baseball caps, fedoras, berets, and eight-panel caps are prominently foregrounded as spotlights illuminate each musician.

The Cherryhill Senior Jazz Combo, comprised of five male students and one female student, ascend to the centre of the stage with instruments in hand. Some of the male members of the senior jazz combo are decked out in colorful renditions of the ‘zoot suits’ worn by the jazz musicians of the 1930’s. The members of the jazz combo confidently engage in a lively interpretation of the Coltrane classic Mr. P.C. Ensemble member David Izzard stands out in his canary yellow zoot suit, as he rhythmically motions back and forth in time with his saxophone. David’s enthusiastic performance brings to life his straightforward synopsis of the performance experience, “there are long hours and practices, but when it finally happens it’s just really great.”

The enthusiastic and frantic applause of the audience communicate an elation that motivates the musicians to intensely indulge in their performance. A young audience participant, a diminutive girl no more than five years old, appears to be transfixed by each melodic note. Her straight black hair flows freely with the perpetual nodding of her head, and her arms wave excitedly as she imitates the beating a drum.

Crowds of fellow Cherryhill students sing along and sway to the cadenced sounds proffered by their peers on stage. This faithful demonstration of support is in keeping with the words of senior arts student Meg Robertson, who attributed the “really easy going” atmosphere of Cherryhill to both the reality that “people are studying what they wanna study, like, music, art, vocal,” and the supportive encouragement offered for such artistic explorations. Meg earnestly surmises, “people are happy, and you know, we go to their shows, like, music and dance shows, and we totally support our friends, and it’s really fun.”
Many administrators and teachers have referred to such performances as an opportunity to bear witness to “students’ passion for the arts.” Stella Warner, teacher and arts enthusiast, noted that a successful student at Cherryhill is “one who graduates with a well rounded experience.” Her hope is that students “will learn how to bring the arts to any aspect of their life because” in her view “it’s the most pure and honest way of expressing yourself.”

Several students view performances as the culmination of numerous hours spent practicing and rehearsing in preparation for an “occasion to share their work,” and experience the exhilaration of a “performance high.” A lanky male student who has appeared as a key figure in a number of the musical pieces takes to the stage once again. His mass of frizzy hair and oversized sunglasses eclipse all other personal features. He appears to be channeling a young Bob Dylan, with each calculated nasally squawk, and fits of deliberate posturing. A young chanteuse joins him on stage. The duet engages in a rendition of *When Love Comes to Town.* The young female songstress impersonates the soulful, seductive, and powerful vocals of R&B legends such as Koko Taylor and Etta James.

As the evening of musical entertainment draws to a close the orchestra enthusiastically initiates their own encore, which the audience pleasingly obliges. The performance is concluded with a flurry of shrieks of delight, applause, and cheers of recognition.
Martelli Collegiate

“A Community of Diversity”:
Diverse Pathways to Success, Diverse Conceptions of the Arts, and a Diversity of Challenges

Elena VanderDussen

In the hour-long bus ride from the bustling city centre towards the east end, the city appears to decrease in height while sprawling out in breadth. Skyscrapers are traded for strip malls, parking increases in abundance, and rows of bungalows weave away from the main intersections. Students flood the McDonald’s on the west corner of Brookview Street and Spinner Avenue East, grabbing breakfast sandwiches and hash browns on their way to school. They don’t have to venture much farther along the busy Spinner Avenue to reach the Martelli Mall next door, home to a Starbucks, Wendy’s, and other chain restaurants and stores. Heading south along the quieter Brookview Street with breakfasts in hand, the students pass the Martelli Manor cooperative housing apartments and a small plaza that carries more family names than corporate brand names including a small Afghani kebab restaurant, a take-out pizzeria, and a convenience store. Smells of grease from the restaurants mingle with the exhaust from Spinner Avenue’s heavy traffic to create a thick haze. The sidewalk rises up to crest a small hill, at the top of which the teens look down at Martelli Collegiate Institute’s massive structure rising out of the hillside, its wings spreading in all directions. Behind Martelli Collegiate spreads the spacious Rawdon Park, a quiet green space secluded by trees that marks the transition from the congested apartment buildings off Spinner to quiet suburban single detached housing further south. Martelli Collegiate finds itself nestled in the centre of these three border zones.

The students trickle down the path to the circular driveway that leads to the school’s entrance. With heavy book bags slung low on their backs, they wear thick padded vests and bomber jackets which they pull tightly around them to ward off the crisp fall chill as they make their way under the massive overhang to the front entrance. Passing under the gaze of the security cameras, the students push through the mesh-windowed double doors to the front foyer. The district school board-issued signs on the main doors read: “Please begin your visit at the office.”

The light doesn’t change much from the cloudy grey outdoors to the indoor entry, where humming fluorescent bulbs cast a greenish glow two stories above the floor. The foyer seems somewhat vacuous with no furniture other than a couple of benches pushed up against the wall. The squeaks of damp running shoes making contact with the smooth tiled floors echo through the space as students pass through quickly en route to their
classrooms and lockers, occasionally pausing to greet friends with a high-five or a hug. A faint smell of chlorine drifts down the corridor from the Olympic-sized pool that complements Martelli’s reputed athletics program.

Corridors lead in diverging directions on diagonals and in straight lines, sometimes leading up stairwells and ramps. Retired police officer Jerry Gale is not fazed by the complexity of Martelli’s immense layout as he casually patrols the hallways, sometimes seeming to be everywhere at once as he plays his role as the eyes and ears of the school. Dressed plainly in blue jeans and a grey sweater, with a walky-talky hanging off of his belt, he wears no clear marker of his role in the school. Jerry is part of the “Safe Schools” initiative from the school board, and speaks about Martelli with almost paternal care for the students who he finds show him a lot of respect. He explains that even though Martelli is “in a bad area,” it is a good school, especially in comparison to some of the other schools he circulates. Other than occasionally intervening in a minor argument among students, he has seen few problems.

The corridor walls leading towards the main office are lined with photos of alumni and staff, extending back into the 1960s. The class of 1983 photo looks like an American high school movie from that time, with lots of girls with bleached frizzy hair piled high, and part-in-the-middle haired boys. Class of 2001 shows a lot more dark faces, hijabs and carved hairlines. Less dramatic change can be seen among the teachers’ portraits, and many of the same faces can be seen smiling through their gradual changes over several decades as staff members at Martelli.

The small main office is bustling with activity as a young receptionist communicates with people both in person and on the phone. In relation to the size of the school, the waiting area of the office is small, leaving room for only a narrow wooden bench for students to wait their turn to speak to the receptionist or receive their late slips. There is little on the walls by way of decoration, with the exception of a sign on the bulletin board that reads: “What people with self control do” above a list of ways to deal with stress, anger, and frustration.

A student behind the counter begins the morning announcements, signaling the end of first period. He reads from a script, informing students of the upcoming student leadership meeting, student anti-violence committee, newspaper committee, and choir rehearsal. Staff and students move in and out of the office in a steady stream of communication with one another that is at once brusque and efficient. A tall, lanky senior student brings in the attendance. Like the other staff and students at Martelli, his ID badge is visible hanging from a lanyard around his neck. As he looms over the counter to pass the attendance to the receptionist, his awkward movements suggest that he is just getting used to the results of a growth spurt that fit him into an unfamiliar size. His serious and focused expression relaxes into a smile as he hands the attendance sheet to the receptionist before heading quickly back to class to start his acrylic painting assignment.

The student returns back to his classroom to join the steady buzz of activity as he and his classmates work independently on their assignments, occasionally working one-on-one with their teacher Bill Douglas as he strolls around the room. A veteran teacher with a trades background in the arts, Mr. Douglas has a profound respect for the diverse ways that
the arts can enrich one’s life. He has vision of the arts as providing a gateway to many different future paths for students to use their talents to find fulfilling careers: “We’ve seen kids turn around because of art,” he explains. He tells the story of a student who had dropped out of high school only to find his way back by taking art classes. As the student developed his talents, he eventually gained the courage to enroll back into a full course load in order to graduate. Very few of even the most well-known artists were ever appreciated in their lifetimes, he reminds his students, and most did not make much of a living through art alone. Mr. Douglas is convinced that as students develop their artistic gifts, they will find practical ways to find artistic niches in trade and commerce, reminding them that “art” is not a single pathway, but that art is a part of everything and every industry.

In a crowded office at the back of the music room, Susan Li sits at her desk. She describes the many arts programs at Martelli as catering to a variety of different conceptions of what an “artist” might represent. She herself teaches drama, music, and dance, and mentions that Martelli is the only school in the area with a full functioning professional theatre space. She speaks with excitement about the new Entertainment Technology program, which had its first graduates last year, and enjoys the facilities of a newly-renovated television studio. In all of her enthusiasm for the many programs that shape young artists and technicians, she is proud of her “fierce” students. These students take on the bulk of the work to drive the programs forward, as more and more technical staff positions have been eliminated by the school board.

Martelli’s reputation of being in “a bad area” is one that staff and students do not ignore, but neither do they accept. As a member of the support staff, Mrs. Erin Engel disagrees with any rumours that the school is not safe: “Martelli has had a reputation – because incidents have happened in this area – of being an unsafe school. Well, in order to combat that we had cameras put all around the school. We wear lanyards.” Aware of the many dangers that teenagers face throughout their high school years, Mrs. Engel sees that young people face far more than challenges of physical danger when it comes to their lives: “so it is a safe place, it’s a place where … a person’s child can come, they can find a variety of courses, they can find teachers that care about them, and they can develop into the individuals they want to be.” Mrs. Engel does acknowledge that the school community faces a variety of unique challenges, being in an area of the city with relatively lower income and higher numbers of families that are new to Canada. She is convinced, however, that Martelli is a community prepared to face challenges and create opportunities for its diverse student population.

The diverse pathways of success that Martelli Collegiate offers, the diverse conceptions of the arts, and the diversity of challenges that the Martelli school community grapples with characterize Martelli Collegiate Institute as a dynamic, living, learning environment, and thus organize this report. A high degree of commitment from students, teachers, and administrators goes beyond general expectations as they carry out their work with passion and commitment to bring these themes to life. The contrast of the vitality of the arts they engage with and the challenges they face as a school community is striking, distinguishing Martelli Collegiate Institute, as Mrs. Engel describes it, as “a place where you can develop your talents.”
Diverse Pathways to Success: “Yes, this is what I want to do”

School administrator Neil Proctor answers a knock at his office door to find two students stopping by to chat between classes. Students are always dropping by to talk to him, he says. Slyly pointing to a glass jar filled with Halloween sized chocolate bars, he confides “I give them chocolate,” though “not in the morning.” A friendly and talkative man, Mr. Proctor sees his move to Martelli as “prestigious.” He explains, “It’s a big school and a big program and a good reputation.” He lists French immersion, the steel band, the school’s long history with dramatic arts, and the specialized visual arts program as some of the highlights at Martelli, “so, it’s looked upon if not a flagship school, certainly a school with a lot of prestige behind it.”

The wide variety of programs at Martelli makes it a school where “a lot of exciting things are happening.” Mr. Proctor comments on the new Entertainment Technology program as “quite a good program; it’s very reflective of the kind of current trends in the, out in the job markets.” The big challenge, he notes, is getting the information out to students about the wide variety of options that they have for electives, along with getting this information out to feeder schools. Through its diverse programs and opportunities, Mr. Proctor sees Martelli as able to provide students with diverse pathways to achieving success in their lives, both in a career, as well as personally:

I don’t necessarily say that you have to go to university or college. Someone who is, who is going to make a positive contribution, and if that means going into an apprenticeship, or college or whatever, but someone also who, who would not just necessarily be passive in their in their actions, someone who is environmentally conscious … you need to be able to, you know, make decisions, have a plan, you know, communicate well with your workers. In fact, one of the biggest things that employers look for is someone who works well with others.

Mr. Proctor hopes that regardless of whether a student aims to go to university or to enter the workplace, “the role for every student is to be, to be a contributor, to be able to work with others, and to be responsible, a responsible citizen.”

“Why Study Art?” A sign posted behind a glass display case in the visual arts wing poses the question, offering its own answer: “The arts are a force for the nation’s economic health.” Another sheet offers a list of “How Arts Education Builds The Skills that Business Values,” referenced from a 1996 edition of Business Week magazine. Down the hall, in a large square classroom, Mr. Douglas hands out small cards, white on one side and black on the other, to the four female students clustered around him by the windows. Facing his students, he uses a sharp metal utensil to scratch off the pitch black Indian ink, exposing the white underside in an intricate design. Responding to their skepticism of how challenging the task appears, Mr. Douglas explains that if they make a mistake they can paint a new coat of ink over it and start again. After demonstrating a few different techniques for making lines in different directions, he gives them a few scrap cards in different sizes, and tells them to experiment until they are ready to begin their projects. The young women disperse back to their easels and Mr. Douglas turns his attention to the rest of the Grade 11 and 12 students.

Students sit alone or cluster in small groups around desks that appear to have been painted with layer upon layer of chalky white. An Afghani student at the back of the class,
his dark shoulder-length hair pushed out of his face by a plastic hair band, wears headphones to block out any sound that might distract him from his canvas. A tall girl, her black hair slicked back into a frizzy bun, sings loudly in a deep alto voice as she adds vibrant colours to her painting of an African woman wearing a bright robe and standing under a tree. A boy with dark skin and short black hair stares at his blank white canvas, paintbrush poised in midair. He quietly tells his neighbour that he is having trouble knowing how to get the right shades for the orange sky and purple mountains that stand out vibrantly from the small reference picture in his hand. The teacher comes up from behind the boy and takes the paintbrush out of his hand, nudging him aside. In bold strokes, the teacher sweeps bright orange across the top quarter of the canvas. Overcoming his initial surprise, the boy begins to ask questions about the techniques of layering colour. Content that his student has learned something from this demonstration, the teacher hands him back the brush. The boy takes it tentatively, dabbing uncertainly at the orange sky.

Teacher Bill Douglas explains that he sees himself more as a consultant than as an instructor. Since the ministry changed the title of his course from “Media and Technique” to “Painting and Drawing,” he doesn’t find that the name accurately reflects the purpose of his course, which is to help students investigate different media and styles in their artistic work. In his course, Mr. Douglas aims to “expose” students to different styles, “force” them to try them out, and even if they don’t want to they “have to.” “You can’t learn if you don’t make mistakes,” he explains, and this course ensures that they will do things in art that they have never done before. By the end of the period, the boy painting the sunset is transfixed in his work, layering colours to create a rich warm skyscape. “I don’t feel like stopping,” he replies, as if mesmerized, to Mr. Douglas’s reminder that it is time to clean up.

The visual art program at Martelli has also taken different pathways over the years, evolving from the 1960s “vocational art program,” and later a “commercial arts program.” Now designated as a “specialized arts program,” it continues its legacy of offering “enriched curriculum” in the arts. According to some veteran teachers, the program has changed since the 1970s. One teacher says that now, “we see more kids that take it in a really genuine interest and they want to do well, and they love art, but probably won’t pursue it as a career as much as they used to when I first came here.” This teacher attributes this shift to the demographic changes of the area; whereas in the 1970s the students were mostly “white European” and the school was “eighty percent plus white,” now the school has a more “multifaceted aspect” that is “culture based,” he explains. Parents today “want them to do very well in the white collar professions, and art is sort of, you know, the blue-collar thing.”

Some teachers try to help their students become aware of potential paths where they can use their artistic talents to make a living in the future. For instance, Mr. Douglas recognizes the immense challenges facing students who aspire to prestigious professions in medicine, architecture, engineering, or in the highly competitive world of fine arts, with the limited resources at their disposal. He helps students to imagine other career possibilities that are perhaps more in reach and in fact more closely aligned with how they may want to use their talents in the future. He sees viable alternatives, like being an “architectural renderer,” to building a successful career. “They get to use their artistic talents,” he notes,
“and they don’t have to compete at the level of trying to be an architect, which very few of them will.” The specialized arts program aims to prepare students in a way that both encourages them to pursue their talents, yet is realistic of the challenges they will face in their future career paths. One teacher explains:

It’s sort of a jumping off point for a lot of them that have this creative ability. They can still get into these areas and work in things that they want to do and has always been their love, but probably wouldn’t have been able to achieve it if they had just gone after the top job. ‘Cause there’s just so few of them at the top. They would be working in the lower levels at something they may not want to do. This way they can still work in the industry and use their creative talent so that they don’t lose it and for some of them that’s the saving grace is they, they get into the field that they always wanted to.

In the technology wing on the opposite end of the school, Liam Yoland hands a small pink card to each group of three to four students in his Grade 10 Drama Tech class. He explains to his students that they will be given the chance to earn some extra marks on their last quiz. “Some of you desperately need bonus marks,” he reminds them, speaking in a projected voice that suggest an acting background. In groups, the students scribble what they can remember about the reasons to light a stage and the controllable qualities of light on the pink cards, asking their fellow-students for help.

“I didn’t discover my inner artist until I was into my twenties,” Mr. Yoland laments, as opposed to his students, who now have the opportunity to study arts and film as a part of their high school program. “The arts is where you can grow as a person.” He hopes that his students use the arts courses to grow personally. He says, “I would love it if some people come away from one of my classes and say, ‘Wow, he really made me think,’ or, ‘I didn’t know I felt that way,’ about a certain issue, or just to . . . get them thinking a little bit is what I would like to accomplish.”

Mr. Yoland projects a short movie about lighting design on the white screen at the front of the class, but the muffled audio makes it difficult to hear the two narrators’ explanations. In the darkened room, two students doodle on black sheets of paper, comparing what look like graffiti tags. At another table, a boy puts on a pair of earphones and reads a newspaper, while a girl works on a Sudoku puzzle. A group of boys at a third table chat and laugh. Noticing the lack of attentiveness among his students, Mr. Yoland springs over to the projector and pauses the video, calling on one of the boys from the chatty table to describe the difference between random and motivated light. “I just couldn’t concentrate,” says one student in his own defense after failing to give an answer, “too much pressure!” Mr. Yoland responds with a repetitive and dramatic shoveling movement, as if digging through a mound of student excuses. The students roar with laughter, some looking back at their classmate and whipping their hands up and down to make a snapping sound. Mr. Yoland again turns on the video to finish the segment before giving his students time to work on their set design projects in groups.

Although it is a compulsory credit for the Entertainment technology program, Drama Tech 10 is an open credit, drawing both those students who have a great deal of interest and commitment to the program, and those who take it out of curiosity. Mr. Yoland has found that no matter what their reasons for taking the course, the arts have helped many of his students to flourish despite challenges that they may have had in school in the
past. “I had students this year that I talked to teachers that they had last year and they said, ‘Oh, watch out for these guys, they’re horrible.’ And they’re some of my top students,” he explains. Mr. Yoland hopes that his students will be able to grow personally in the arts through employment in the future. “If they’re investing in that as a program here, and putting that many hours and that much time into developing their skills and honing their skills and making the contacts, um, I’m hoping there’s a light at the end of the tunnel, there’s a job on, on the other end.”

“Rob’s a good example,” his former teacher Mr. Yoland describes him, “came out of the program last year and is placed at Royal Theatre now.” Although Rob Tucker already graduated from Martelli a year ago, he can still be found hanging around the tech wing, since he returned to do a co-op year with a professional theatre. Rob’s friendly, awkward manner communicates the quirky “techie” stereotype of confidence and focus on his chosen field. He describes his experience at Martelli and the passion that he admires in his teachers: “Once you get into something, you will love it. The teachers love the subjects they teach, they love what you do. If you know what you want to do, Martelli offers the programs for you to go into and go ‘yes, this is what I want to do.’” Rob discovered what he wanted to do by having access to the new Entertainment Technology program at Martelli.

I’m a hands-on person so I do enjoy building, working with electrical things. I do have the ability to do everything else, it’s just nothing truly caught my interest ... I’ve always loved theatre and film and stuff like that so I went, okay, I’ll go in that direction, started looking at it, and the deeper I went the more I started to enjoy it, the more I started to love it.

With the help of Martelli’s Entertainment Technology program, Rob found a pathway to success that allowed him to combine his “hands-on” abilities with his love for the arts.

In a square classroom darkened by heavy thick grey curtains, Rohit Singh reaches for another pencil crayon from the Crayola set he has brought from home, contemplating his poster of the bright red “Santa Fe” train on the desk in front of him. The teacher smiles at his progress, commenting on his steady, solid colouring. The student next to Rohit focuses on her vibrant underwater scene, using her own set of Prismacolour pencils. The teacher pauses at the girl to Rohit’s left, reminding her of the need for consistency in her poster’s lettering. While most students have copied fonts from stencils or models, this student has attempted to design her own font in a way that reflects the wispy flow of the poster’s image. As the teacher works her way around the large “U” of desks in the large, spacious art room, she is full of praise and encouragement for her students, who chat quietly in groups as they work around the desks.

Some of the words that Visual Art teacher Marilyn Porter uses to describe her work as a teacher include facilitator, teacher, role model, and confidante. She believes that one of the strengths that she offers to the arts program at Martelli is her background, which has included teaching in temporary positions all over the city as well as working for ten years in the business sector. She sees a lot of opportunities for people to use arts in business, such as in advertising or in packaging, so she tries to help her students develop skills that they can apply in different areas. While she cites diminishing funding as a problem, she would like to see the specialized arts program expand at Martelli, offering perhaps an
animation course as another way that students can apply arts to possible career paths in the future.

Martelli offers anywhere between fifteen and eighteen visual arts credits a year, a significant number more than general arts programs. Students who take at least six credits of visual arts are eligible to receive a specialist certificate, which can help them go on to pursue post-secondary paths in the arts, whether it be art history, studio art, or trades programs. Mr. Douglas believes that it is the variety of arts courses available to students who have a passion for the arts that distinguishes Martelli from other schools, enabling them not only to take multiple arts credits, but to focus their arts training in the field that they wish to one day pursue.

Student Skye Owens does not plan to complete the six credits to achieve the specialist arts certificate, yet taking specialized visual arts classes at Martelli has helped her to think of possible future career paths that combine her talent in art with other interests, such as science. She describes an interest in biomedical communications as one possible future:

it’s basically you’re doing the illustrations for like, medical textbooks. Um, or like public information pamphlets and things like that. So, I just, I like the idea of it because you’re using your ability to do art combined with your understanding of science to create something that will be understandable to other people.

As a senior student contemplating high school graduation only a few months away, Skye has little clarity about what her future might hold. Regardless of whether arts will feature centrally in her future career path, however, she plans to continue to pursue arts as a way to enrich her life: “I think probably at some point in my life I’ll take art classes again, even if I don’t study it at school or anything, just because um, it’s something that I really enjoy to do.” While students see the arts as impacting their futures in different ways, the nature of the programs at Martelli allow them diverse opportunities to imagine pathways to successful futures that integrate their artistic talents in unique and innovative ways.

Diverse Conceptions of the Arts: “Everybody likes different things”

The Martelli student news is filmed every Monday afternoon after school, transforming the tech room into a hub of activity. The black curtain has been pulled back to reveal a large green screen, and a wooden desk has been rolled in front. Behind it, two black stools are arranged for the news anchors. Lights, camera, teleprompter, and several chairs for crew members face the screen. Mr. Yoland sits on the sidelines watching, explaining that he is mostly just there to supervise the largely student-run production.

“Okay guys, ready to go?” Fiona, a twelfth-grade student at Martelli, calls out to the room full of students. Like the large blue lightning bolt on the front of her white t-shirt, Fiona seems ready to strike into action. Her long light-brown hair is parted on the side and pulled back into a low ponytail, where it cannot distract her from her focused work. The group springs into their appropriate positions: one listening to the microphone through a headset; another on lights; another scrolling down the script that appears on a small
teleprompter; and Fiona behind the camera. “Sports first!” The make-up artist emerges from the back of the room carrying a basketball, which she places alongside a sports jersey on the newstable. “Quiet on set!”

Karl delivers his sports report with ease, ending without a single mistake. “Karl – one-take magic!” exclaims Mr. Yoland. “I’m a one-take man!” replies Karl proudly, strolling off the set with his hands in the air, triumphant. Rob and Kristen take their places to shoot the opening, closing, and news stories. Comfortable in his role, Rob reports on the successful grade eight parents’ night, informs students that registration forms are now ready for night courses, and announces the upcoming meeting for the Sears Drama Festival. “Attention all actors, artists, performers, and most importantly dedicated students,” his story begins. Kristin struggles with her delivery. Fiona suggests that she read each story aloud several times for practice, but Kristen keeps tripping over words, throwing her hands over her face with embarrassment. Each time, Fiona offers calm words of encouragement while the rest of the group waits patiently. Finally, Kristen manages to get out her three stories successfully.

Mr. Yoland explains that the Martelli news has been running for four years, and Fiona is the only one who has worked on it both this and last year. She has her work cut out for her: writing the script, editing the shots, and teaching all the eager ninth and tenth grade students how to use the equipment. Mr. Yoland recounts that when he couldn’t attend the grade eight parents’ night the previous week, Fiona stepped up, greeting parents, explaining the drama technology course, and even demonstrating the use of some of the recording equipment. “Fiona, what’s a good day to hold a Sears meeting?” he asks her. Fiona looks up from her work and pauses for a moment. “Thursday,” she replies. While Fiona sees a lot of room for development of the arts programs at Martelli, such as renovating the large auditorium and increasing support for the Entertainment technology program, she does feel that Martelli has offered her unique opportunities to become a leader in the arts in a way that she may not have been able to in another program:

The fact that the program really isn’t in place has given me, at least me specifically … more experience. I guess I could say in different aspects of what I want to do. Because if you go into a school that does have this sort of very cut-lined program, with teachers who run the whole thing, um, you don’t get to do as much, in some ways. Right, like, you can perform and they pick you because they think you’re good, and this and that. But, from where I am … I’ve just tried to fill the places that I think has been Ms.ed and so, what I’ve been doing is run or just be in charge of a lot of things that many students in other high schools who did have a program wouldn’t be ever able to experience until, say, later on if they were going on into this business. So that’s been a huge thing for me.

Fiona goes on to describe how the close and collaborative relationship she has with her arts teachers has nurtured her leadership skills. While “not exactly equal,” Fiona has a sense that they are working “on a same level,” because they “both use each other’s strengths.”

While opportunities for students to shape the arts at Martelli indicate the conception of the artist as a leader, other students appreciate the holistic nature of the arts in helping them to develop into well-rounded individuals. Kelly, a student who did not
initially come into the art program, bites her lip in concentration, working to master the choreography in a Musical Theatre class. When Kelly first chose Martelli for its extended French program, she wasn’t initially aware of the artistic opportunities that existed. Now in the tenth grade, she is heavily involved in both band and musical theatre alongside extracurricular involvement in choir and dance, and intends to achieve the specialized arts certificate by graduation. While she is still “not too sure” about what she wants to do after high school, Kelly sees many opportunities at Martelli to become a well-rounded individual:

I think it’s important to be well-rounded, and my marks right now are very good and my math and sciences and everything like that is very strong, so if somebody in a university went to look at my applications they’d see that I had the academic qualifications. But they, if they also saw that I was into the arts and acting, they’d see that I was a well-rounded person.

In addition to well-roundedness being important for her own life, Kelly describes Martelli as “a nice school to go to ... you have many opportunities to get involved, uh, and there’s kind of equal opportunity, I guess, like there’s not a big music program but very little sports or whatever, it’s fairly well-rounded.” In fact there are many ways to become well-rounded at Martelli, Kelly explains as she lists off soccer, dragon boat, athletic association, and music council as some of her favourite activities. Kelly describes her friends as “also into the arts and, and sports too, so they’re well-rounded.”

During lunch break, eleventh grader Gayal Nadarajah is more likely to be found in the visual art room than in the cafeteria. The visual arts course “doesn’t feel more like a class, it feels more like, I don’t know, it feels very um, homey. It does. It feels like, you always want to be there, I always want to be there.” Gayal gathers the plastic jars of acrylic paints into a cardboard box to be stored after class. She explains that while it’s important for famous artists like Gauguin to be innovators of artistic styles, she doesn’t see this as true for herself. Rather, Gayal sees the importance of subjecting her own work to others’ criticism in order to know how to “make it better.”

I think another person’s perspective is, it’s good because you’ll see your art and be like, okay it’s perfect, I love it and it’s beautiful. And then, someone else ... might think it – um, it’s okay, but you know, this could be different, or that could be different, or that could be more better. So I think it’s better, so you can next time when you do it, you can consider that. Make it better.

Gayal recalls Mr. Douglas telling her class that you can’t just do great art for a living, and reminding her that not even the great artists were recognized as such in their own time. “History repeats itself,” she quotes.

While artists are sometimes seen as leaders and innovators, sometimes they are in dialog with the perspectives of others and use the arts in a variety of ways that are not always considered “great art.” Opportunities to learn the ways in which the arts can be used in a variety of fields and trades allow Martelli students to see the arts as a way to make a living. Whether as leaders, as well-rounded individuals, or as workers in other fields, students see the arts as enriching their lives in a variety of ways.

* * *

“Great Balls of Fire” pipes through the hallways at ten minutes before 9:00am, but no one seems to take much notice. When it is replaced by the theme song from the cartoon sit-com The Simpsons, students walking through the halls quicken their pace to a light jog.
After a lesson on music theory, girls with jeans, hooded sweatshirts, and black-padded coats, and boys with oversized logoed t-shirts take their places behind their drums. The teacher climbs onto a chair at the front of the class to gain some height, and raises his arms to get his students’ attention. As they play their first number, “Autumn Leaves,” students groove along to the music, their eyes glued to the sheet music before them as they play. Three girls passing by in the hallway dance a few steps into the room before continuing on their way. “In this class, we cater to the diversity,” says the teacher before their next number. “Should we play ‘Brazil?’” he asks the class from his conductor’s perch atop the chair. This suggestion is greeted by hoots of agreement and two girls in the front dance in a circle together to show how pleased they are with this choice.

Originally from Trinidad, Easton Lewis began the steel band to meet the needs of a diverse population at Martelli:

> We have almost over one hundred um, uh, different nationalities coming to this school ... I thought I would introduce it more so, so that the Caribbean student would have something to identify with and um, strange enough [chuckles], we got students from all nationalities, from India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, uh African countries, Sweden, we had a student from, and we have of course Caribbean students as well. But I was amazed to see the wide spectrum of students that we, that is the program attracted and even today we have, you come to my class and my principal once remarked, “You know something with your steel band, there’s everyone, you know, there’s every race, you can see every race is represented in your steel band.”

While one of the more well-known programs at Martelli, with performances booked around the city and even internationally, the steel band is not officially considered a part of the specialized arts program. Since its inception, the steel band has been separated both in its physical placement and its departmental collaboration from the official music program, which often features more classical European and North American musical styles. Mr. Lewis’s class features a wide variety of musical cultures and genres:
In our class we can play an East Indian song, whereas in the regular music program, you won’t hear them playing an East Indian song or a reggae song. So in my steel band class we play reggae, we play pop, we play classical, we play calypso, we play folk songs, and uh, we, we include all the genre of music that you can find, so students can identify with something of their own and I think because of that they feel more, uh, less intimidated and less stress when they come to my class and less fear and it’s a more friendly environment to learn, and there’s no pressure.

Mr. Lewis wonders if the conceptions of the arts at Martelli rarely includes the kind of diversity that he feels is integral to the needs of his diverse students. After many years of struggling to get the steel band recognized as an established program, being denied funding and shifting classrooms from term to term, Mr. Lewis has become a resilient problem solver to move the steel band class forward. His resilience is paralleled in what he hopes for his students and where he sees the role of the steel band in developing resilient problem solvers through the arts:

Life is about solving problem[s] … that’s what education is about … and the steel band class is no different because when you come, you’re facing a new instrument, you can decide to run away. The first day when you come, you can decide, this is too hard for me, I cannot get it, I don’t have timing … and what I’ll achieve through the steel band program, they’ll, they’ll learn to solve problems, they’ll learn to fight, struggle, overcome, feel good, you know, and grow.

A Diversity of Challenges: “It’s Completely Worth It”

On a rainy October morning the grey-green school hallways at Martelli seem unusually hushed, devoid of the student energy that usually fills the corridors. As teachers push through the mesh-windowed double doors, shaking the rain off their collapsed umbrellas, they make their way upstairs to the second floor library where they will have their monthly staff meeting. The library quickly fills up with teachers who stop at a food table at the back of the room to load up napkins full of finger foods and paper cups of coffee before finding a seat at one of the round tables that fill the library’s central space. The cheerful colours of student artwork contrasting against the beige background of the walls, which remain only half painted, give the library a warm, comforting feeling that contrasts to the chilly rainy day outside.

From one corner of the room, Edwin Hall’s booming voice cuts through the loud buzz of conversations. “Ladies and gentlemen and those who are neither!” he opens, drawing chuckles from some of the staff as they reluctantly turn from their conversations. His round silver earrings sparkle as he conducts the proceedings more as a Circus Ring Master than as a chair at a meeting. His tall stature seems to be in constant motion making him captivating to watch. After opening the meeting and thanking the math department for their “math designed breakfast,” Mr. Hall turns the meeting over to Bill Douglas. Walking from his chair to where the administrators sit at the front of the room, Mr. Douglas carries a large card about two feet high, covered with expertly-drawn designs including a sketch of a smiling middle-aged man. Respectful silence fills the room as Mr. Douglas speaks humbly about the contribution of this man, Mr. Cooper, who had dedicated thirty-nine years as a teacher at Martelli, until finally losing the battle to cancer only months before. Mr. Douglas made this card to celebrate this teacher’s contributions to Martelli, and even though Mr.
Cooper passed away before the school could officially honour him, Mr. Douglas hopes that his colleagues will sign it to share their appreciation for this teacher’s work, and to let the teacher’s family know how much he will be missed.

When Mr. Douglas was himself a young teacher, he had tried out a number of schools, but after teaching at Martelli, he just stayed. “People seem to settle here.” He feels that this is a unique feature of Martelli Collegiate, and a characteristic that makes teachers want to spend most of their lives at the school. Mrs. Erin Engel, one of Martelli’s student support staff, has worked for nearly twenty-five years at Martelli, electing to stay because of what she describes as a “collegial” environment for staff, and a “place of stability” for students.

Mrs. Engel’s small office has a window facing the driveway at the front of the school, from which students can be seen trudging through the newly-plowed snow on their way in and out of the building. She speaks with a warm, low cadence, which immediately puts whoever she is talking with at ease and comfort. Mrs. Engel’s desk is stacked with piles of papers and files, literature for colleges and universities, a computer and telephone, and colourful printed sheets of “tips for student success.” A row of chairs in Mrs. Engel’s office is frequently occupied by students, who come in often and sometimes unexpectedly to talk about everything from course selection to future plans to crises in personal relationships. She has seen and heard a lot of things from students over the past several years that other staff and faculty members have not. The escalating challenges that she has seen affecting students have concerned some of the most personal elements of students’ lives: “Where you would have situations, situations that are occurring within families that are causing so much distress to the students that they can’t even focus in school. And so, I’m not saying things didn’t exist like that in the past, but they’re becoming more apparent, I think.”

The changes in the school’s environment are intimately linked, Mrs. Engel muses, with some of the changes in the school: “We are considered sort of an inner-city area at this point where a lot of the students that come into this area are from immigrant families.” With challenges of an unfamiliar language and environment and difficulties finding employment without Canadian training, parents are under a lot of pressure to meet a variety of needs for their survival in a new country, she describes. Mrs. Engel believes that the arts at Martelli offer some of the greatest hope for these students who are new to Canada. Arts offer that “breather course” that sometimes helps students find the will power to come into school every day and fulfill the requirements necessary for graduation. However, Mrs. Engel is not confident that the relationship between the arts and success in one’s life is well understood, whether by parents or students, or even teachers and administrators: “If you do drama, if you do art, if you do music, you don’t make money. So you’ve got to find a job that makes money.” Mrs. Engel speaks with great optimism and determination to meet and overcome whatever comes their way. In fact, at times Martelli has voluntarily accepted students who are no longer permitted to attend school anywhere else.

Sitting in his office after handling a challenging, if unusual, outburst from a student that resulted in his expulsion, school administrator Michael Dexter seems surprisingly
calm. He describes his perception of Martelli: “The kids for the most part are great. And you know it takes a while to get to know them, but a lot of kids are very needy here, uh, economically ... many of them come from impoverished families.” Mr. Dexter believes that Martelli offers students the kinds of support that their situations don’t always allow them: “despite all of that, most of them do come out of here, um, in much better shape than maybe they arrived. They come out with a diploma and having had a good positive experience, but a lot of them are really, really needy. So that’s a challenge.”

In the auditorium, Kyle Stone awkwardly and carefully avoids the newly-pierced ring in his dark brown lips as he eats his ketchup-soaked fries before rehearsal. As one of only two boys in the Musical Theatre class, he admits he is not looking forward to his solo in the upcoming Christmas Assembly. His closest friends at Martelli are two girls, he explains, because they have the same interests. Students divide themselves up in different ways: “I think that people just gravitate to other people who are like them. So there’s like, what we would call the Lankan crew, then there’s the white crew” Kyle laughs as he names the groups that make up his typology of students at Martelli, specifically students who identify as Sri Lankan and white students. “Yeah, the biggest one you’ll notice is division by race. And then, the second biggest would be division by interest.” Kyle states that his friends are grouped by interests, which for him include Musical Theatre, playing the flute in the school band, and the anti-violence program SAV. Kyle doesn’t see violence as a major problem at Martelli, despite its reputation:

There’s a lot of talk of like, gangs and stuff in our school. But you come here, and unless you’re like, a part of it, you’re not going to notice it, so it’s not as scary as it seems ... if something does happen, it’s not during school time, it’s after school, and most people leave after school. And stuff doesn’t actually happen that often. We haven’t had anything happen since I was here.

Skye Owens echoes Kyle’s sentiments about Martelli’s reputation as she thinks about what it is like for her to be a student in the Martelli environment: “I would say the environment is very great to be a student because um, like, some people think the school has a bad reputation but it’s all the people that I know here are all generally quite kind and friendly.”

The last period of the Martelli school day rolls around. On the auditorium stage, its edges littered with winter coats and book bags, Ms. Li’s musical theatre class springs to its feet as Fiona calls out: “Alright, in your lines!” Displaying different levels of confidence, the students negotiate the demands of the music theatre class with humour and determination. “You guys ready yet?” Fiona calls out, as Ms. Li prepares to accompany them at the electric piano. “NO!” replies a girl in a blue t-shirt and brown corduroy slacks, which are rolled up to reveal hot pink socks slouched down to her jazz slippers. As Fiona demonstrates a complicated series of steps and lunges, Ms. Li asks the frustrated dancer why she is wearing such a foul expression. “I wasn’t giving you that face, I was giving Fiona’s legs that face. What are they doing?!” The entire class erupts into laughter.

Ms. Li invites students to try the number with top hats, which she removes from their plastic wrapping. She apologizes for the cheap quality of the props, explaining that cost was a serious factor. “If I had one million dollars we could put on one heck of a show,” she jokes. The dancers crowd around, excited to receive their hats. As they dance, however,
the plastic hats crackle loudly at each movement, drowning out the sound of the singing. Their attempts to get through the number are constantly interrupted as students collide and plastic hats fly in every direction. Ms. Li laughs so hard that she can hardly keep up with the piano accompaniment, echoed by her students’ laughter as they take on the plastic hats as a conquerable challenge.

The school bell buzzes to signal the end of class, and students begin to pour into the hallways. A couple of boys in the hallway kick a soccer ball back and forth against the metal lockers. The students in Ms. Li’s Music Theatre class, however, continue their rehearsal without interruption. “One singular sensation, every little step she takes!” they sing. Occasionally, Ms. Li stops her piano accompaniment so that Fiona can give instructions to the dancers, before starting up again where they left off. Not until around ten minutes after the bell do the dancers slowly start gathering up their coats and bags and heading for the door, one at a time, to go home at the end of the school day.

Praveen Siri sits on a folding chair on the apron of the stage, dressed completely in black. With his padded coat and faux fur lined hood, wool gloves, and a corduroy cap perched deliberately askew on his short black hair, he looks ready to walk out into a blizzard, his tall and skinny frame protected against the elements. A shadow of a mustache shows on his upper lip, and his deep-set eyes are focused and intense. He seems at home on the empty theatre stage as he describes the role of the arts at Martelli in his life:

Art is actually how I get out of pressure. And it’s um, pressures in my life are mainly focused on, on family situations more than anything ‘cause growing up um, I came here [to Canada] in 1994. So, basically about two and a half years we were kind of pretty much running low ... back then it was just like we all may, we only lived on like a meal a day ... my parents became abusive to each other, you know, became abusive to me ... that like really puts me in a position where I needed to kind of get it out somewhere else, and that’s where I chose art.

As Praveen tells his story, he emphasizes each point with his hands, demonstrating his passionate determination. He describes how through the most difficult parts of his life, the arts programs and teachers at Martelli gave him a way to deal with his family problems and launched him into writing and performing his own songs about life’s pressures and social issues. Praveen uses his music now to reach other youth who may be in challenging situations. Ultimately, Praveen sees himself as a social worker in the future, and hopes to help other youth the same way the teachers at Martelli have helped him:

I actually connected with my teachers on a very social level. Like, like Ms. Li is like, is kind of like, she mothers me sometimes. Because we’re on that level, like she knows a lot about my, you know, my history and my life so, you know, she’s even said like “hey, I’ll pay for you, if you want to go and take vocal lessons. I’ll pay.” ... So, she really, she really truly, you know, believes in what I do. So, in that way it completely, it’s completely worth it.

**Conclusion**

Staff members wearing Santa hats merrily stroll by roaming students in the hallways without so much as a disapproving glance, even though it is 9:45, and students should normally be in class. One of the secretaries wears a green ribbon in her hair and a snowflake broach on her red sweater, and she greets visitors amidst a mountain of gifts
that are stacked on the desk beside her. There is no question that this is the last day of
school before the holidays. A boy and girl practice a dance routine in the corner, just
outside the staffroom, executing an impressive series of steps in perfect unison, clapping,
stepping, and slapping their shoulders or thighs to a practiced rhythm. In the cafeteria, a
group of cheerleaders wear spandex shorts and blue jerseys that contrast with their dark
brown skin, practicing a choreographed dance routine. On the floor beside them, a small,
seven-year old boy is sitting contentedly, sometimes bopping along with the music blasting
from the stereo next to the cheerleaders.

Students start streaming into the auditorium. Many enter in groups, sometimes
calling and waving to friends across the aisle where they have saved seats, dividing
students into groupings by colour of skin, style of dress, age, and gender. The crowd seems
to organize itself effortlessly into highly complex but well-established patterns. While some
teachers sit among students, many stand along the walls where they can watch over the
students, forming a border of authority around the perimeter of the rowdy mass.

As the houselights dim, and the steel drums are lit up at centre stage. The crowd
erupts into deafeningly loud screams and cheers, setting the volume level of the audience
for the entire show. It quickly becomes apparent that the noise isn’t simply in the form of
cheers of support between numbers. Through most of the performances, students talk
loudly and yell both in support and in criticism of the performers. Often, boos are matched
by cheers, coming from different areas of the crowd. A hip hop dance troupe comes on
stage and is quickly accompanied by the first three rows of students who stand to dance
along with the music, waving their hands in the air and cheering in support. In the next
number, a young man in traditional Indian dress performs a solo in Punjabi. To the rhythm
of the music, a few students wave their cell phone slowly as if they were lighters, and
slowly the room is lit up with LED screens. A sense of contagious excitement spreads
throughout the crowd as more and more students hold up their electronic devices.

The show continues with girls singing R&B songs in small groups, salsa routines,
and popular student bands that bring the crowd to their feet. It is an eclectic mix, with a
remarkable number of students performing over the course of the entire show. In the
varied array of student performances that unfold throughout the show, students are joined
by their teachers in their merriment. One of Mrs. Engel’s favourite moments at Martelli is
the annual performance of some of the more outgoing teachers:

In that Christmas Assembly, there’s always a song done by the teachers ... the kids just howl
every year. But I can tell you at almost every commencement, especially if this one teacher ... is
um the MC, he’ll start at one point singing: “I’m a Lumberjack” and the kids will start to like hoot
and holler and stuff like that, but it’s just the teachers are out there doing the most crazy things
that you possibly could do.

For Mrs. Engel, this moment represents the spirit of dedication that the teachers
have for their students, as well as the overall uplifting spirit and atmosphere of the school:
“And it’s every year ... if it wasn’t at the Christmas Assembly this would not be Martelli,
which sounds bizarre, but it wouldn’t.”

The performers also have to negotiate a steady stream of technical difficulties: an
amp blows out; the CD player cuts; or the temperamental microphones often stop working
in the middle of a song. The audience responds each time, laughing, cheering, or screaming in disappointment, as yet another student is silenced on stage. About halfway through the show, Ms. Li makes an announcement: “Sorry about the technical difficulties. It’s due to old equipment.” She sounds tired and frustrated, but determined to go on. “Yo! Put me on the turn tables!” calls out a student from the back of the auditorium, eliciting cheers from his peers. The music theatre class comes on stage to perform the opening number to “A Chorus Line,” rehearsed meticulously over the past semester. Over the rowdy audience, their voices are barely audible, yet they maintain their performance faces of smiling determination. After three hours the show finally ends with the Christmas movie created by the small group of students from Mr. Yoland’s class, demonstrating sophisticated filming and editing, and a creative and humorous storyline.

As the semester culminates on this high note of rowdy excitement, the Christmas Assembly appears to showcase the diversity that characterises Martelli and its arts programs. The diverse paths to success that Martelli enables its students to pursue, the diverse conceptions of the arts present at Martelli, and the diversity of challenges that Martelli staff and students encounter create a community that is at once multifaceted and dynamic. While this diversity creates complexity in how it is expressed and experienced, Martelli Collegiate Institute is a place where diversity is seen as an essential part of life, as reflected by Skye Owen’s reflections on her experience at the school:

I feel like this is a good school for that just because you’re such a diversity of people ... I think I’ve sort of learned a different way of seeing school here, because I used to see it only in the sense that it was a place to get an education, and now I see it kind of as a place to learn about people as well.
**Dannerville Collegiate School for the Arts**

“**Inspiring life-long learning and a desire for personal excellence**:  
“A positive, safe environment,” “Working together to achieve our goals,” and “A constant battle”

Kate Cairns

**Heavy traffic rumbles** eastward along Stanley Avenue, the bustle of the city core receding into the background as the vast expanse of suburbia unfolds on the horizon. Stripmalls line the three-lane thoroughfare, accented by the occasional neon sign of a fast food outlet. On this crisp November evening, cars slow as they pass the massive Campbell Crescent Shopping Centre, where a Zellers and Food Basics are visible from the road, and idle in front of the used car dealership at the intersection of Stanley and Wellington. Turning northward, the built environment transforms abruptly as rows of small bungalows emerge on each side, their blue and red mailboxes dotting the perimeter of Wellington Road. Only a short distance along this residential stretch, the parade of vehicles slows once again, turn signals pulsating almost in unison. As each car steers into the parking lot of a modest brick building that is sheltered by pine trees, their scanning headlights illuminate a sign on the lawn. “Dannerville Collegiate School for the Arts,” it declares, bearing the familiar green and white letterhead of the district school board. Beneath this glossy heading, a message arranged in removable letters announces that tonight is Grade 8 Parents Night.

Inside the school’s small foyer, prospective students and curious parents peruse paintings and prints displayed on tables, and scan theatrical images of student performances posted on the walls. A few minutes past seven o’clock, two students dressed in black appear and spread their arms in a dramatic welcome, thrusting open the heavy wooden auditorium doors. The crowd shuffles into the auditorium, seizing the opportunity to spread out across the 650 folding seats. As each family cluster settles into its own pocket of seats, the group’s rich diversity becomes visible in the wide spectrum of fashion styles and languages being spoken in the room.

As the lights dim, the crowd falls silent and the heavy red curtain parts smoothly at centre stage, framing the school band within a crimson border. Sharply dressed in white pressed shirts and black slacks, the student musicians take their cue from music teacher Cam Liddle, who plays the dual role of conductor and accompanist, his head nodding subtly as his fingers maneuver among the frets on an electric bass. Seated at the keyboard on stage right, a male student grooves along to the familiar Stevie Wonder tune, his round afro bobbing to the beat. Six beaming tap dancers shuffle in from the wings, their carefully choreographed steps adding a layer of percussion to the ensemble as their bright tops
splash colour across the stage. Finally, the singer appears, a tall and slim young man who slides confidently among the dancers’ flirtatious gestures, comfortably occupying the centre of attention in his pink dress shirt and jeans. Wielding a wireless microphone in his right hand, he works the audience with his charming moves and tuneful refrain, “I wish those days would come back once more.” When the group strikes its final pose the crowd erupts into applause, the younger members of the audience cheering over their parents’ clapping.

After several stunning performances, including a beautiful choral arrangement and an edgy student-choreographed dance piece, a series of speakers deliver impassioned sound bites on life at Dannerville. Administrator Nadine Ladner describes the school’s unique “three-pronged” structure, where students from the local community share academic classes with those who have come from out of the area to attend the specialized Visual Arts and Performing Arts programs. Nancy Quinn speaks warmly of the school’s “barrier-free facilities” that have earned Dannerville its status as a designated site for students with physical disabilities. Student representatives sporting matching outfits adorned with the Dannerville emblem promote the many extracurricular groups at the school. From the Student Activities Council to the Poetry Cafe, each enthusiastic rep echoes the inclusive mantra emphasized on the school brochure. “So open, thoughtful, inviting,” it reads, describing Dannerville as a “safe and caring environment [that] inspires life-long learning and a desire for personal excellence.” As curriculum leaders from Visual Arts, Math and Science, and English describe the positive learning environment fostered within each department, they paint a portrait of a diverse and supportive school community.

* * *

A glimpse into the workings of this complex community, this report explores how Dannerville students and staff describe the experiences, strengths and struggles that define their school. Having recently earned formal recognition from the school board as a designated “school for the arts,” Dannerville has realized a longstanding institutional goal. Even as this achievement is celebrated, the school must face new challenges, and continuing to cultivate the sense of community, collaboration, and resilience that have traditionally defined Dannerville remain central to its future. Known for its culture of openness and acceptance, staff and students describe Dannerville as a positive, safe environment where diversity is welcomed and celebrated. This supportive setting fosters a climate of dedication and collaboration where staff and students are working together to achieve their goals. Yet alongside these collective strengths, members of the school describe a constant battle to maintain excellence in the face of limited resources. Dannerville emerges at the intersection of these three themes of community, collaboration, and resilience, and the particular opportunities and obstacles they create.
“A positive, safe environment”

Sitting among a colourful collection of dilapidated secondhand furniture in the Visual Arts teachers’ lounge, Michelle Holland reflects upon her early experiences at Dannerville. She chuckles and admits that she “had a lot of cultural adjustments to go through” as she settled in at the school.

I remember telling a friend when I first came here to work, “I feel like I’m caught in the old television series, Fame!” I go out for a walk just to see what’s going on, right? And they’re the most interesting things because kids are making their own clothes, they’re doing t-shirts, there’s always something going on. And it’s not only that you get that feeling from the visual arts students, it’s kind of a general overall thing. Right? Um, the students are very, very active.

Mrs. Holland is not the only one to highlight the energy that resonates throughout the school. Students and staff paint a picture of Dannerville as a welcoming space where diversity is celebrated and individuals are encouraged to be themselves. Words like “friendly,” “laid back,” “open,” “accepting,” and “safe” come up frequently in conversations about what sets this community apart from other high schools. In the opinion of Drama student Keira Montgomery, who has returned for a fifth year at Dannerville, this is a school that provides students with “the environment to, you know, figure out who they really are.” She says that in some high schools, students “wouldn’t necessarily feel comfortable, you know, just learning about themselves,” whereas Dannerville provides opportunities for this sort of “self-discovery.” When asked how she would describe the school to someone who’s never been there, Keira exclaims, “Amazing!”

As if unable to fully convey her enthusiasm while seated, Keira scrunches her legs beneath her to perch on her plastic cafeteria chair, maneuvering easily in her baggy black sweatpants and hoody. “Oh, I love it. Um, I really wouldn’t know where to start. Like, I’m, right now I’m getting all flustered because I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh! Like, what do I talk about first?’” Keira laughs at herself as she struggles to find words to capture her feelings about the school. Finally, her gray eyes widen as she settles on a single statement. “I guess I would describe it as, um, a positive, safe environment.”

Staff and students at Dannerville see this “positive, safe environment” as supporting a diverse community of learners, and they describe diversity along several different dimensions. As one staff member explains,

Students of all, you know, from all different social backgrounds, all different socioeconomic backgrounds, you know, a lot of different students feel very welcome here...I think that’s even, you know, as much as how the students like to dress and the acceptance of the fact that students may dress very differently, that’s always been part of the tone of the school.

Individual members of the school highlight particular aspects of Dannerville’s welcoming environment that are especially meaningful to their own identities. Nick Cole describes the school as “an extremely friendly environment,” and notes that, as a black student, he appreciates that “there’s not too much, like, segregation, there’s not too much racial stuff.” He pauses and adjusts the chunky headphones around his neck as he considers
how best to describe his perspective on race relations at the school, then chuckles, and says, “It’s just, this is like the Canada of high schools.”

Of course, not everyone experiences this same degree of openness. Grade 11 student Fran Hoffman describes how she negotiates different responses to her style, which many would describe as Goth. Fran wears Doc Marten’s black leather boots, black fishnet stockings, and a black “faerie” skirt with safety pins fastened to the sides. Her blondish hair pulled back into a ponytail, Fran’s black eyeshadow sweeps up to her eyebrows and circles all the way down to her cheekbones, a solid black line demarking her eyes’ edges. Although some might interpret her appearance as the expression of a harsh personality, Fran is polite and friendly, and offers a thoughtful analysis of how she is perceived by staff and students at Dannerville.

I just couldn’t think of dressing any other way, just that’s the way I am. And a lot of people, like a lot of students, when they first don’t know me, they associate a lot of negative connotations with me...But a lot of kids, once they get to know me, realize I’m not this creepy, stupid person.

Fran hangs out with a crowd of students often referred to as the “basement kids.” Although most students insist that there are no cliques or hierarchies at Dannerville, the basement kids are often described in terms that challenge this picture of an inclusive community. “Unless you’re a basement kid, you usually stick above ground,” states one grade 11 student, who insists that many students avoid the area of the school where Fran and her friends hangout. “It’s a place you don’t want to go. I mean it’s scary, it’s dark and it’s loud!”

Despite this negative stereotype, Fran seems genuinely untroubled by the way others in the school describe her group of friends. “You know what? We just don’t care what you think so we are going to do whatever the heck we want,” she says with confidence. “That’s why I love hanging out with them, ‘cuz we’ve gone past the point of caring what anybody else in the school thinks.” So while Fran’s experience as a so-called “basement kid” complicates the dominant school narrative of complete openness, she has ultimately found Dannerville to be a place where she is able to express herself.

Other students foreground the school’s accepting environment as a key factor in why they chose to attend Dannerville. Now in grade 12, Kris Montero recalls his own decision process four years earlier: “Because it’s such an accepting school... I was just finding out that I’m gay, and it was just better, because if I were to go to [my home school], I know I’d get picked on and stuff.” Speaking at a rapid pace, Kris describes Dannerville as a place where he is able to be himself, and “just kind of go free, you know, not really care what anybody thinks.” This makes school a welcoming place. “It’s easy being here,” he says.

The support that Kris feels at Dannerville is not only an informal aspect of the school culture, but is also actively promoted by the Gay/Straight Alliance. According to Patricia Rousseau, one of the teachers involved with the GSA, the group formed four years ago with two primary objectives:

First of all, just to provide a place in the social network for kids that were either out as gay, lesbians or trans, bi or trans... just to give them sort of a safe network to be able to talk about issues. But also to just, um, just to highlight that we are not going to be tolerating any
homophobia whatsoever in this school. So by having a visible group that is supported by teachers and the administration then hopefully that has, you know, will help combat homophobia.

Ms. Rousseau sees value in providing students with “concrete information” and “proper language” to be able to engage in a more “open and honest discussion about sexual orientation.” As a result of this work, she has seen “a slight shift over the past four years” in terms of fostering an environment that welcomes diverse sexualities. Nevertheless, Ms. Rousseau suggests that the school’s culture of openness presents its own challenges for combating more subtle forms of discrimination.

I think part of it is that those that are homophobic or who will outright bully, discriminate, or tease kids, they are more cautious and more quiet about it because there is a sense that it is less tolerated here and there is a higher likelihood that they will be called on it, and there will be consequences for their behavior, but it still exists. And sometimes those more subtle forms of homophobia are almost kind of more difficult than the overt ones, because it’s almost as if you don’t know where it is coming from.

Thus, even as small successes are celebrated, they must be viewed as steps within a larger journey, as instances of discrimination persist despite the school’s reputation as an accepting community.

Alongside these efforts to cultivate openness and acceptance within the school, Dannerville’s “positive, safe environment” is also fostered through an approach to curriculum and pedagogy that embraces diverse learning styles and students. Several academic teachers describe their efforts to incorporate the arts into their own subject area, be it math, business or social studies. Beyond the specific form and focus of each lesson, Benita Rahmani describes how she strives to cultivate a classroom environment in which “students know that if they have something to say, they’ve got someone to listen.” Connecting her own teaching practice to Dannerville’s broader learning community, she notes that the school provides “quite an open environment for students,” and that she aspires to translate this openness into new and exciting learning opportunities within her classes.

It is because of this openness that grade 12 student Brie Timmons describes Dannerville as “the greatest place in the world.” The sense of the school as a “positive, safe environment” resonates through this student’s confident words:

I actually wake up and am excited to come to school. I know that like, no matter what’s going on, if I’m upset I can come here and I won’t even get five steps into the school and there’ll be either a student I know or a teacher I know or Henry the hall monitor, just someone there to like, make me feel better about my situation.

Clearly proud of her school, Brie feels that Dannerville’s profile has risen throughout the city in the four years that she has been a student there. “Like, I can say Dannerville and people are like, ‘Oh ya, I’ve heard of that. Isn’t that that little school for the arts in [the East end]?” And I’m like, ‘Ya, that’s the place,’” she says, beaming.
“Working together to achieve our goals”

Nick Cole sits cross-legged in the hallway and studies the double doors that he has appropriated as his canvas. He looks comfortable in his red baggy sweatpants, white basketball jersey and red plaid hooded jacket. His black toque seems to defy gravity, tilted sideways on his short afro, and a bulky set of headphones hang around his neck. He examines the caricature figure in his painting, whose long arm stretches across the two doors as if it were an elastic band. Nick’s work is punctuated by frequent interruptions, as students stop to admire his artistry, often reaching down to give their friend a high five or a supportive handshake. With each new admirer, the artist’s focused expression erupts into a wide smile, often accompanied by a deep chuckle or a quick line of beatboxing.

Nick believes that his experiences at Dannerville have greatly shaped who he is as an individual. He says that if he’d gone to another high school, “like, the way I would be as a person would be very different.” He continues: “Dannerville kind of like moulds you into a certain kind of individual, so when you go out into the world of art, er, you’d be prepared for it.” But for Nick, the pursuit of individual goals is a collaborative process, and it is his close working relationships that define his Dannerville experience:

My closest friends here are very similar to me cuz they have similar goals. And we kinda like work together to achieve our goals.... Like, let’s just say my buddy’s doin’ a project and he has to draw himself. I’ll be like, you know, “Touch up the nose. Bring it up, lift it. Tweak his eyes,” you know, whatever. And then he does it and it looks better and he’s happy. So my relationship with my friends at Dannerville’s more like ... It’s like we’re, we’re working toward our future, but we’re just havin’ fun with it.

A few steps down the hall, Lee Cathan echoes what his friend Nick has said: “The thing about being in an art program is people share the same interests, so there’s a really great sense of almost community.” For Lee, working toward his goals means combining his artistic skills with his passion for politics, and he recently created his own charity selling t-shirts that feature his art around issues of war and child poverty. The idea for the charity actually emerged out of a World Issues assignment – evidence that Dannerville students draw on both academic and art experiences as they develop their personal aspirations. “Personally I really think if I’m gonna go into art ... I hope to be able to do something positive,” Lee explains.

These students have likely acquired some of their passion for collaboration from watching their teachers work closely together in their own artistic and professional development. Visual Arts teacher Michelle Holland explains that while “all our teachers are practicing artists,” the members of the department excel in different areas, so “each teacher is kind of like a lead teacher in a way here.” She appreciates how the department creates opportunities for staff to learn from each other, and notes that her own skills have improved as a result.

I can paint; I sure can’t paint like Robert Newsom. So Robert has really been improving my painting. Since I’ve come here I think my painting has gone up leaps and bounds...So a lot of the professional development is actually peer. It’s not coming from outside sources.

Stories of the collaborative pursuit of personal goals are echoed by students and staff throughout the school. But since Dannerville is a complex and diverse space, the
theme of “working together to achieve our goals” manifests in a variety of ways, as members of the school community take up this project in relation to their own roles and aspirations.

Performing Arts students also highlight cooperative endeavours, describing the importance of mentorship as a core principle of their program. For Grade 10 student Olivia Noble, this has meant coming to terms with the fact that “you don’t know as much as the older kids and like, you’re learning from them and like, they’re your teachers.” Brie Timmons reiterates this point from her perspective as a senior student. She says that the biggest thing she’s learned through four years of the music theatre program is “you have to be a team player”. She repeats the mantra so often espoused by the program’s artistic director, to “leave your ego at the door.” As Brie describes the significance of this team orientation, she echoes the words of her teacher and mentor, framing collaboration as a matter of artistic professionalism:

I think you have to be the kind of person who is in it for the team, who is in it for the show, the group, the production in general, isn’t it in for, “Look at me, look at me! I need to lead! I want this part! I need to be the main focus of attention.” Because if you’re like that and you have a lead and then the day before the show you get cut like people always do, then you’re gonna go and be a big baby about it and go cry and have a hissy fit when that’s, that’s not professional at all. You couldn’t do that in the professional world.

Students in the music theatre program learn early on that being a member of this team requires immense dedication, sometimes even sacrifice. Olivia Noble describes the difficult decision to stop playing soccer during her grade 9 year, when she realized that she just couldn’t juggle extracurriculars alongside program commitments:

I had to quit the soccer team and like, it was heartbreaking “cuz like, I had made a commitment to them and I just had to like break that, which was hard. But...we have to understand like, that like, music theatre does come first.

Olivia says that the biggest challenge that students in the music theatre program face is “the balancing of like, of everything.” Even though achieving this balance has required Olivia to make some sacrifices, she ultimately feels that the trade-off is justified. “And ya, it gets tiring but like, because we love it so much, like, it’s worth it,” she explains.

Teachers have worked hard to establish this sense of collective commitment within the Performing Arts program. Teacher Isabelle Graft insists that the staff “really team teach on the stage and off the stage.” Isabelle describes the program as a “fine-oiled machine,” and notes that teachers meet daily in order to coordinate their evolving schedules. What’s more, this collaborative spirit extends beyond this tightly-knit teaching staff to include a network of professionals who are frequently invited to work with students. Isabelle explains that for this year’s production of Fiddler on the Roof, “we’re hiring a professional fiddler to be on stage, so that the kids always rise to the sort of calibre of the professional that’s with them.” Within the Performing Arts program, the notion of working together to achieve collective goals means forging strong connections with artistic professionals. “We collaborate with each other and we also collaborate with the community,” one teacher states proudly.
Despite this emphasis on collaboration, teachers within the Performing Arts admit that tensions sometimes arise as a result of the level of dedication that is expected of students in the program. As Chris Edwards remarks:

I mean just today at lunch on my way here I had two teachers speaking to me about a field trip, and then their ultimate Frisbee team because some of the kids involved with both of those are in the special rehearsals...There always has to be a big negotiation every time around this, um you know, and um we have to remind them, you know these rehearsals, these performances are curricular—it's part of the course work, you know as opposed to something that is extra-curricular.

Isabelle reiterates this struggle. She notes that students who “audition to come to the school are coming here for the performing arts, so at the end of the day that usually takes precedence.” Yet, she acknowledges the tension between the program’s integrative philosophy and the expectation that students will forfeit other commitments in the interest of the show. “If our whole philosophy is that it’s holistic,” she considers, “then we should want the student to be able to play sports and to be as diversified in their high school career as they can.” Ultimately, though, she sees value in teaching students to “prioritize and understand that you can’t do everything.” On the whole, Isabelle thinks that relations within the school have improved over the years, and that the different departments have gotten better at negotiating this tension. “It’s a challenge, but we have been able to work around it,” she says.

Others, however, see this issue of balance and flexibility as a persistent tension within the school. Many academic teachers insist that although they are expected to accommodate the specialized programs, their efforts are seldom met with the same degree of compromise. “I sometimes feel like we need more support in the sense that, for example, we give up time for the kids to be able to go and, and perform and rehearse. And I just feel that after that period of time is over, we should maybe get back some time,” says Sangheeta Endela. She suggests that working toward this balance needs to be a community effort embraced by the school as a whole. Reflecting the tensions inherent in the theme of “working together to achieve our goals,” she states, “So I would really like to see more collaboration, you know, between the departments.”

Members of the administrative and guidance teams offer their own thoughts on the challenge of maintaining a collaborative environment alongside specialized programming. “I think if you talk to the academic teachers, they’ll tell you one of the biggest struggles is that the kids who go to performing arts are out of school during show times or rehearsal times,” Nancy Quinn explains. “How do you catch those kids up and how do you teach your regular class? … And how do you keep teaching the regular kids in your classroom with integrity?” These questions illuminate how efforts to accommodate the specialized arts programs impact all members of the Dannerville community, including students from the local area whose classes are often shaped around the needs of those in the arts. Ultimately, Dannerville faces the challenge of supporting the specialized focus of the arts programs while also advancing the collective objectives of the school as a whole. Ms. Quinn raises the question:
How do we provide special programs but also make sure that the kids are going to graduate, have opportunities when they finish? That we’ve got that academic integrity held as well as the special program. And that’s a difficult balance, it really is.

This shared challenge manifests in students’ personal struggles to balance the specialized programming with their desire to pursue other interests. Grade 12 Visual Arts student Nora Tarasick loves dancing and has taken ballet classes outside of school, but has been unable to study dance at Dannerville. “I haven’t had time,” she explains. “Well, not just that I haven’t had time, it’s the fact that um, art takes up so many credits, it’s hard to kind of fit in other things.” In fact, Nora’s position within the specialized program has prevented her from taking the courses that would best support her desired future as a costume designer, because Dannerville’s fashion courses are not part of the special series. “But again, that’s one of those classes, Fashion, that I can’t really get into ‘cuz it’s during this art period,” she says. Even still, Nora is hesitant to criticize the program structure because she feels fortunate to have the opportunity to devote so much of her schooling to art. “Having all that time for art is great,” she says. “It’s about two and a half hours a day, which is really great. For something that all these kids here really love, like, it’s great to have them spending that much time on it.”

In light of the diverse perspectives and interests that make up Dannerville’s rich school community, the theme of “working together to achieve our goals” becomes a challenging endeavour, even with the immense commitment of staff and students. This process will require continual negotiation, in order to balance the dual demands of specialization and well-rounded educational experiences. Patricia Rousseau offers the reminder that “at Dannerville Collegiate School for the Arts, the collegiate is as big a part of us as the school for the arts is.” In the words of administrator Nadine Ladner, this means recognizing that “the politics of life here is that, you know, this is not a theatre company, this is a school. And as a school, we have a responsibility to educate in all aspects.” Members of the school recognize this challenge, and many are optimistic about the possibilities that are opened up by working together to pursue both specialized and collective objectives.

“A constant battle”

In the low lighting of the narrow, cozy, Performing Arts office, tucked around the corner from the auditorium stage, Beverley Nichols recounts the endless financial struggles that have shaped the program’s journey. She contrasts the “organic” development of the Performing Arts at Dannerville with other specialized arts programs in the city, and insists “nobody threw money at us, nobody told us to do it.”

All those other schools were, had all the rooms, all the everything. Everything we’ve got, we’ve gotten from the complete opposite way that all the other schools did. Every dance studio, every new space has been by some principal fighting for us or what have you because – and this is really important – because we’re in a poorer area and we don’t have the doctors and the lawyers and the what-have-yous on as parents.
Now a specially designated arts school with a Performing Arts program that draws students from great distances, this teacher is proud to say that merit, not money, has been the root of Dannerville’s success. “We just happened to have a great product, and that’s how come our reputation started to grow.”

Nevertheless, the school’s financial struggles continue, and the challenge of maintaining excellence in the context of scarce resources is a source of both strife and pride at Dannerville. Describing the feat of “running a school on a shoestring,” Nadine Ladner notes wryly, “at least the shoestring leads to creativity.” As an administrator, she has heard countless stories from staff members regarding the creative transformations that have occurred over the years. From transforming a fitness centre into a dance studio, to building an extension on the stage in teachers’ spare time, each anecdote reflects the story of the school’s ability to adapt to changing needs with limited resources.

Teacher Keith Larkin insists that one of the things he likes most about Dannerville is the fact that there’s always “room for improvement.” Nevertheless, he admits that money remains a source of tension within the school. While he is “not privy to too much of the details,” Mr. Larkin has seen his own budget tighten in the past few years, and describes the challenge of “trying to figure out how to improve and spend less than fifty percent of what you used to.” Even when the school accesses needed resources, like the provincial funding they recently received to build a large set design space on the first floor, their own budget limitations make it nearly impossible to capitalize on these opportunities. At this time, the one million dollar facility remains a large open space since there is no money for resources. This absence is most apparent within the mezzanine computer lab, which features a nice new counter, but no computers. Mr. Larkin laughs as he describes the absurdity of having access to such an impressive new facility but lacking the very equipment needed to take advantage of this space.

The school’s financial struggles do not go unnoticed by students. In one Grade 10 Social Science class, Natalie Morrison leans into the aisle engrossed in conversation, a handwritten paragraph left forgotten on her desk. Her long blond hair pulled back with a butterfly clip, Natalie blinks her blue eyes before making her next point, revealing a coat of sparkly eyeshadow. “I think the Visual Arts are under-appreciated here,” she states, matter-of-factly. Arguing that Dannerville’s Music Theatre students get all the attention, Natalie references the expensive new renovations on the first floor. The boy behind her pipes in, lamenting that the “MT kids” get a “2 million dollar room,” while the sports teams are forced to take public transit to their games. The comment provokes laughter from surrounding students. Seemingly satisfied, the boy adjusts the gold chain around his neck and leans back in his oversized red t-shirt and baggy jeans.

Teacher Leslie Thorndike admits that she shares some of the frustrations alluded to by these students. Perched on the edge of a sunken couch cushion in the staff lounge, she describes the complicated financial history that has shaped ongoing tensions around funding within the school. “It’s an issue at this school because for a long time we were trying to get designation as an arts school,” she explains. In Ms. Thorndike’s account, the staff was told that “with the name was supposed to come extra funding,” and so for years,
academic departments tightened their belts because they “were basically supporting the specialty areas.” However, Ms. Thorndike says that in the three years since Dannerville gained formal recognition as an arts school, nothing has changed but the name. “So my budget hasn’t gone up in ten years, which is ridiculous!” she says. In addition to cultivating frustrations among academic teachers who feel slighted by what they see as a prolonged pattern of unfairness within the school, Ms. Thorndike suggests that these funding disparities mean that Dannerville can barely provide students with the minimal resources needed to support their learning.

I’ve had two overhead projectors die because they’re like twenty years old... And buying those have wiped out my entire budget. ... So money is a big issue because I think that puts us behind in our programs, our academic programs, which is frustrating because the content we teach is exactly the same as any other school.

Ms. Thorndike leans back against the orange couch cushion and sighs. “There’s not very many negatives about working at this school,” she insists. “It’s a really nice place to teach. That would be the one issue I have. And if it wasn’t, if we were funded enough, I wouldn’t care what they did.”

The desks in the Guidance office are covered with piles of blue, white and yellow forms, making it appear as though those working there are literally buried in work. While those in Guidance work closely with the administrators, their combined workload could easily warrant multiple departments. Admitting that the team is overburdened, Nancy Quinn expresses her concern that as a result of the administrative demands of the specialized programs, they are unable to provide adequate support to those students who need it the most. She and others involved in supporting students,

can talk about how we wish there were things we could be doing for kids in terms of support and counseling and tracking the at-risk kids in our building, whether they’re in any program, doesn’t matter. But we have so much of this administration kind of stuff to do that unfortunately, sometimes we don’t have the time we’d like to be spending with the at-risk kids.

Nancy lists a few of the challenges that Dannerville students face, including poverty, depression, and abuse. She notes that, although not always the case, these issues are often most severe among students from the local neighbourhood—the very students who are sometimes overlooked by the focus on specialized programming. She envisions “a fairer world” in which Dannerville would hire “additional staffing in Guidance to help with the administration support of this program,” freeing up more resources for counselling services. But as a pragmatist, she knows this prospect is unlikely, and is determined to provide the greatest support possible with what the administration can offer:

So this has been a constant battle. The, you know, we rarely, we’re here long, long days ... And it still, you always feel like you’re not doing what you’d really like to be able to do for kids. So it is a frustration.

When asked if there is anything about the school that he’d like to change, Grade 12 visual art student Lee Cathan pauses, and scruffs up his already messy brown hair as he thinks. After a moment, he concludes, “the only thing I guess, more funding and better reputation.” Lee suggests that because the school is located in the city’s east end, it is sometimes “misrepresented” in the media, despite the fact that “it’s an excellent school.” In
terms of funding, he admits that he doesn’t know the ins and outs of the school’s finances, but understands that “we always go, ah, over budget, apparently.” Quick to defend this practice, he adds, “but we do, we spend it well, certainly.” Lee laments that although Dannerville is “just as good, if not better” than other schools, it hasn’t received the same recognition as other specialized arts programs in the city. Looking ahead, though, he sees a promising future for the school:

I think, ah, our reputation is slowly increasing, getting, ah, we’re getting out there. And ah, there are people that are way further out of the area, mind you, that come here...and they keep coming here, so that goes to show you that they’re dedicated. Um, we’re definitely up there.

Looking forward

Diane Rempel enthusiastically describes her involvement in Dannerville’s Vision Committee, which is drafting a plan for school initiatives in the coming years. Now in the early stages of “vision casting,” Mrs. Rempel is working toward asking questions that will facilitate reflection. “You know, what does Dannerville do best and what does it want to do better, or how does it want to do things differently, and how are we gonna get there?” In a school as diverse and complex as Dannerville, this process involves consulting various departments and cohort representatives in order to ensure that all voices are heard.

Bringing her past experiences with arts education in a variety of contexts, Mrs. Rempel offers some insight into the challenges presented by Dannerville’s unique administrative structure. In particular, she suggests that the “school within a school” model, serving students from the local community as well as those within specialized programs, can be difficult to maintain without a faculty liason whose job is to “ease the stresses that kind of come up between the arts and non-arts part of the school.” Mrs. Rempel is also quick to highlight the school’s many strengths, including the 12-credit visual arts requirement that allows senior students to spend half of their school day in the studio. “This is something you ought to be just promoting like crazy,” she insists. The Vision Committee aims to raise the school’s profile through increased communications, as well as to forge new and innovative partnerships with local organizations. Ultimately, Mrs. Rempel sees these efforts as strengthening Dannerville’s already vibrant community and providing greater support and opportunities for staff and students. “I’m hoping that the work that we’re doing will be unifying to the school, and will also give people some direction...things to pin their wish lists to and some, some ways of realizing some of those wishes.”

As teachers draft their own wishlists, resources consistently pose a formidable obstacle. Isabelle Graft dreams of the day when Music Theatre can hire live musicians to accompany rehearsals, but admits that the prospect is unlikely when they can barely finance program necessities. “So I think it would probably go back to money,” she admits. Administrator Nadine Ladner recognizes this sticking point. She sees the Vision Committee as a means of “developing networks and sponsorship, commitments from outside people to come and help us and to increase our profile in the community, but also as a way of getting better resourced from the community.” Leaning forward to rest her forearms on the table, her blue eyes wide and round, she emphasizes the significance of these new funding
initiatives for the future of the programs. “If we want this to continue, then we've got to decide that that's got to be part of our focus.”

David Lee recognizes that the school’s challenges extend beyond the task of securing more resources, and into the complicated issue of achieving an equitable support system across departments. “I definitely think that the school has been working hard to support our special programs,” he begins, thoughtfully. “And you know, we are really hoping that we can continue to find, I guess, the right kind of balance between supporting those programs as well as all of our other programs as well. I think that it's a difficult balance to hold.” Considering this challenge further, he admits that the issue of balance involves more than just money, and also demands “recognition of students in sort of all the areas of the school as well,” including academics, athletics, and extracurriculars.

Dannerville students’ visions for the future reflect these diverse elements of their educational experiences. Some have been drawn to the school's specialized programs because of dreams to enter the professional artistic community, whether as animators, actors, costume designers or directors. Others speak proudly of the school’s rigorous academic programs. Grade 11 student Sawsan Khan has begun taking business courses and hopes to pursue a career as an investment manager. Beyond these specific academic preparations, Sawsan sees value in the diverse experiences and relationships that she has found at Dannerville. “My communication skills have gotten better,” she explains. “Once you graduate from high school you’re going into the outside world, so being in this school actually helps me out with that because, like, there’s a lot of different people in this school, different types which you will find outside of school too.”

Sitting in the hallway outside the dance studio, Sitara Hayes carefully studies the script for this year’s show, where she will perform her first lead role. Her long Indian skirt is spread out on the floor around her, its earth tones matching the beautiful brown, yellow, and beige scarf that wraps around her hair, accentuating her dark tanned skin. Sitara plans to attend university in International Development Studies next year, and hopes to start her own non-profit organization some day. She admits that others sometimes question her choice to attend a specialized arts program:

A lot of people ask me that, like “Why are you in drama focus, in music theatre if you’re, you’re not even gonna pursue it?” But it’s the stuff that you learn in performing and being a part of a group and the breathing exercises, even the smallest things can affect you and you can take it with everything that you do. It’s just, they instil so many important things that don’t just have to do with performing, just finding yourself and different things like that which are so valuable.

For Sitara, participating in the Music Theatre program has provided her with the feeling of “being part of something that is bigger than yourself.” While she is excited about the many new experiences that await her after high school, Sitara admits that she will miss the supportive community that she found at Dannerville. “It’s like a family,” she says, smiling. “It’s been a fantastic experience.”
Sherwood Secondary Academy

“It’s Wonderland and it’s Free Admission”: “The Cherry on the Ice Cream,” “The People are what Makes it Great,” and “The Best of Both Worlds”

Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, Elena VanderDussen, & Yuko Kawashima.

On the north end of what is now considered part of the Toronto core, the sparkling new facility of Sherwood Secondary is buffered from a bustling commercial district by a few blocks of quiet and well-kept residential neighbourhood. Students jay-walk from mall to school, fording muddy pathways with their “Ugg” boots and Converse sneakers in the snow. The polished and alluring physical spaces of both the mall and the school share similar architectural characteristics in their design, with high ceilings that extend up several stories, and large round spaces anchored with staircases that spiral up and down. Walking into the large and airy three-story front foyer of Sherwood Secondary, it can be easy to forget for a moment that you are in a high school. “It’s a beautiful school, it looks like a mall!” one teacher describes, recalling his first impression of the place.

The central importance of the arts at Sherwood is evident in every direction upon entering the spacious school foyer, suggesting the strong presence of the Richard Monette specialized arts program. Light from the many windows on all sides floods the main hall, illuminating a row of display cases on the south wall, each of which features one of the five majors of the specialized arts program. Corridors on the main floor lead towards the dance, drama, and music departments, with the front-most section of the school dedicated to an ample reception area for performances. The refurbished auditorium, with a seating capacity upward of five hundred, is all that remains of the original Sherwood Collegiate building structure, which was demolished to make way for an entirely new state-of-the-art facility a few years ago. Professional dance studios with sprung floors neighbour “black box” styled theatre spaces on the ground floor, bridged by the highly equipped set-building carpentry shop. Large airy studios on the second floor are for the visual and screen arts specialized classes, filled with brand new supplies. Apple Macintosh computers line the wall of one screen arts room, while technical equipment hangs from grids on the ceilings around different parts of the room. While the arts occupy the largest and most centric spaces at the school, academic courses are housed primarily on the periphery, with social studies classes filling in the narrow classrooms on the third floor, mathematics rooms across the walk-way to the far west wing, and physical education in the basement.
Balconies surround the central foyer space, exposing the hallways on each level where visual art can be seen hanging from the walls, and a giant staircase connects the floors towards the foyer’s end. A bell rings, and suddenly Sherwood comes to life as a high school; students flood the staircases as they move from one class to the next. School administrator Carl Cross describes that it is the students that make the place thrive:

The kids that are in these programs almost bring a life to the school … this school seems to pump more, it’s got more of a beat. I’m not sure if that’s from the Rick Monette program, or if that’s the type of kid that goes to school here … when I walk in the hallways, and you can see someone doing a dance or Music or Drama or practicing or something like that. So it has that spirit to it. There’s definitely more spirit in this school. Of all the schools I’ve been in Toronto, actually, I would say this school has the most spirit.

Most students and faculty express excitement about being part of the Monette program at Sherwood. They express the sense that being part of this school is a great privilege, and that it is a place where great people come to take advantage of great resources in a context in which the arts play a major role in shaping student experience. These experiences manifest through three themes that are explored in this report; first, the important role of the arts in shaping what happens at the school and the sense that the arts are what one teacher described as “the cherry on the ice cream,” the thing that makes Sherwood Secondary stand out and shine as a unique and phenomenal place to teach and learn; second, the sense that what makes the place thrive is the caliber and enthusiasm that students and teachers bring to the program and the qualities that make these students and teachers exceptional; and third, the notion that Sherwood in general and the Monette program in particular provide resources and opportunities for everybody.

Encompassing arts and academics, the “enriched curriculum” of the Monette program provides an alluring environment of choice and opportunity for students and parents in Toronto, cultivating an atmosphere that is highly competitive, socially dynamic, and driven for success.

The combination of academic and artistic excellence is reflected in the mission statement of the Richard Monette Program:

The Richard Monette Arts Program is a dual thrust program of arts and academics for auditioned students in Grades 9 through 12 within Sherwood Secondary School. It offers an enriched curriculum for students with special interests and talents in Dance, Drama, Music, Screen Arts and Visual Arts. Auditioned students specialize with an arts Major focus along with elective arts courses in an atmosphere of creativity, artistic and academic excellence.

Sherwood is an impressive school, both in its physical appearance and its polished performances. It gives the impression of fun, of liveliness, of energy, and even luxury. At the same time, it’s a public school, with free access premised on openness, and an expressed commitment to offering room for anyone with a talent and drive. This combination of public access to an education marked by the presence of the arts where energy and enthusiasm keep the school abuzz leads one teacher to describe what it is like to be at the school: “the Monette kids are jumping on the trampoline, bouncing around, you know what I mean? It’s just another day at the park. It’s Wonderland and its free admission.”
“The Cherry on the Ice Cream”

“Is Sherwood Secondary your first choice or your second?” Two anxious students talk while waiting in the line marked “DRAMA” on the Richard Monette Specialized Arts Program audition day at Sherwood Secondary. “I don’t know,” her companion answers. “It’s my first choice,” says the first girl, smiling with certainty. At 7:45, on a cold morning in January, most schools in the district are vacant as students have a few days off at the end of the semester. The glass-walled reception hall at Sherwood Secondary, however, is packed with students, some holding large portfolios and canvases; others dressed in leotards or dangling ballet and jazz shoes in hand. The volume seems to climb with the excitement as the time ticks closer to 8:00, when auditions officially begin. “I wanna hurl!” Another Rick Monette hopeful tells her friend as she checks in with registration for her nametag and audition materials. Her nervousness seems to echo the energy of all the students there, waiting to see if they will become members of the Rick Monette program of the Arts.

The reputation of the Rick Monette Specialized Arts program is preceded by twenty-five years of artistic excellence. Housed at the Sherwood Secondary School, drama teacher Ms. Ellen Briggs describes the Rick Monette program as “the cherry on the ice cream” of an already well-reputed and high-achieving school:

The school as a whole has high test results. The school is a beautiful building so the facilities are gorgeous. The school has very little problems in crime, what some of the other schools are known to have. So, we have high academics, nice space, very few problems, so I think all of that creates an impression. And I think the arts school is the cherry, you know on the ice cream ... It’s the designer label.

Sherwood Secondary did not always have the glowing reputation that it does today. Teachers and administrators recall that before the Rick Monette Program, the school was known for its problems with drugs and violence. One administrator describes that since the initiation of three specialized programs at Sherwood Secondary, the school and local community have undergone a noticeable transformation:

Rick Monette came in here, the Gifted program came here, and the Gifted Athlete came here. So three specialized programs raised the standard of this school, because you got to attract other students from other areas. Then it changed the dynamics of this neighbourhood ... I think because of this school, the housing around this area has changed. Because you’ll see a lot of small homes and then huge homes. So people have chosen to buy property in this area, tear down that small home and build this humongous mansion in order for the child to come here.

The physical transformation of the residential community surrounding the school is mirrored in the physical transformation of Sherwood Secondary’s physical space. While the gifted and athletic specialized programs were relocated to other schools, the Rick Monette program has grown and flourished, requiring a redesign of the school’s physical space. The old school building was “completely wiped out” to make room for the school’s new “beautiful brand new modern spaces.”

One way that the arts “shine their light” on the school is through the enthusiasm and “school spirit” that students in the arts program emanate throughout the school space.
Students in the Rick Monette program confirm descriptions of an energizing school spirit at Sherwood Secondary. Iris Kelly describes her friends in the program:

we get really um, excited and hyper together, like we feed off each other’s energy and like, it’s kind of, I don’t know. Have you ever seen the movie Fame? It’s kind of like that like, all the time, like there’s always somebody dancing in the hall, and we’re always like, coming up with new ideas for like, shows like, we can do. And we just have a lot of fun together.

Brittany Hughes, an eleventh grade student in the newest of the program’s five specialized arts majors – the Film Arts program – suggests that the school’s spirit fosters a “good dynamic” of supporting each other’s strengths, “not in a competitive way.” Ninth grader Visual Arts major Kylie Merchant, however, has found the transition to high school to be somewhat overwhelming in the specialized arts program. While she has been able to adapt to its rigour, she suggests that others find the program to be “too much:”

Life here in this school is really hectic and it’s overwhelming because so much [is] going on all the time … there’s so many people, like you’re walking around the halls, you don’t even know like, half the people that you see and it’s, it’s really like, it’s like a mini, like it’s like a mini city in the school and I, it’s, it’s really, it’s really good, like for me some people, I think they find it too much. Like, I know a few people have actually left from visual arts because it was too much for them.

Ms. Marilyn Hoskin, an experienced dance teacher at Sherwood, suggest a different interpretation of the spirit of the school in comparison to when she first arrived as a teacher:

I remember it was Fame. This school was Fame; it’s not now. It’s a very different school, the school I started in, and the reason I came was because it was an art school, it was all the dance majors wanted to be dancers. Now, you get maybe one out of thirty who say “I want to be a dancer,” the rest want to be doctors and lawyers. Which is fine, but it’s a different feeling.

A change in the student population over the years, Ms. Hoskin suggests, has resulted in a different feeling to the school and a different meaning of the purpose of the arts. Music Teacher Mr. Anthony Berg offers a different interpretation of the changes he has seen over the years, suggesting that the arts teachers have brought a new shape to the program:

It certainly has changed, and a lot of it has to do with the teachers who are delivering the curriculum. … in the ten years that I have been here the changes that have happened, the changes have been driven by the teachers who are in front of the classrooms. And, yeah, I am sure that some of them are positive changes and some of them are not positive changes. But, I think that we have a slightly different program now than we did ten years ago. And I think it has everything to do with the teachers who are in this place.

Mr. Keith Bell, an administrator at Sherwood, is difficult to keep up with as he moves quickly through the halls, always with a clear sense of direction and determination. Passing through the wood shop, which is filled with large industrial machines, several students working on a wood carving assignment stop him to ask a question. Mr. Bell seems to hold answers to the many questions that come his way regardless of department or location in the school, demonstrating his intimate relationship with the workings of the Rick Monette program. At Sherwood Secondary, Mr. Bell sees his role as one of advocacy for the arts:

I’m advocate for the program and make sure that the new vice principal or principal doesn’t change the program, or disrupt the program, or want to put their stamp on the, and change the
direction of the program, or dismantle the program. So that the incoming VPs would understand what the program is about. And that’s one of the biggest things to me is making sure that they understand that.

Administrators suggest that operating a school with a specialized arts program like Rick Monette needs to be handled differently than at a regular school, both because of how the arts shape the spirit of the school as well as its impact on administrative aspects such as scheduling. As part of the Rick Monette program, the school requires its students to obtain an additional credit each year to the standard eight, the logistics of this accommodation can be daunting. “There are 2100 kids in this school and 200 kids control the timetable because it has to be structured around that ninth credit,” one administrator explains. The impact of this administrative challenge also shapes the school in other ways, however, as Ms. Judith Chalke suggests:

it creates problems, and I think it creates this elitist attitude. The other part of that is that these Rick Monette kids do their Arts but then they also do English together and they believe it’s taught like an enriched English. So ESL kids cannot be in Rick Monette, kids who are applied level cannot be in Rick Monette. So it creates this elitist, you know, because it’s not open to everybody, really. I mean, they present it as it is, but it really isn’t because with the timetable the way it is, because you’ve got to fit in that ninth credit, you have to have another subject that is willing to take the Rick Monette kids.

As a parent, Rachel Michaels describes the burden of the heavy Rick Monette schedule as one of the major reasons why her daughters decided not to pursue the Rick Monette program, despite their keen interest in the arts:

both my daughters are more interested in the sciences, and we were told that, let’s say you wanted to go into medicine, hypothetically, and you had to carry, in your Grade 11 and 12 years, three sciences, two maths, English. It’s almost a guarantee that you have to go to summer school then to fit in a major in an Art through the Rick Monette program. Because there’s not enough courses in the schedule to get everything. So you either have to be prepared to do five years of high school or else take a couple of credits in the summer. And we just didn’t want to have that as a given when we entered Grade 9.

The administrative aspect of integrating such a complex arts program as Rick Monette presents challenges that affect every aspect and constituent of the school. Despite these challenges, however, administrators speak to the fruitful influence of the students of the Rick Monette program and how well they interact with the rest of the school:

if you’re a Monette or not a Monette, or what, you know ... I don’t see the tension at all. ... I haven’t had anyone [say] “Oh this is a conflict with the Monette kids,” or “this is a conflict between the Monette’s and the non-Monette’s” and stuff like that. But it’s sheer numbers, too. Probably twenty, twenty-five percent of our kids are Rick Monette kids, right? I mean, that’s a really big percentage when you think about it. And these kids are the ones that are performing and doing. The other kids are too, I mean, it’s not like the other kids are not involved.

Rounding a corner on the main floor, lockers transition into change rooms that lead into a room full of wall-length mirrors and upright pianos framing an empty central space. A group of students in dance leotards and pink ballet shoes claim their territory on the marley sprung floors, some are sprawled out to form an ambiguously circular shape with the other students, who appear to be talking at the same time, as if trying to project their
voices over the others. One girl yells out “guys, listen to Melanie!” perhaps in an attempt to gain order. Another young woman with her hair tied into a neat bun and wearing a black top and grey sweat pants rolled up above her ankles practices dance moves, seemingly oblivious to the vocal chaos around her. The teacher in the room stands on the sidelines, explaining that they are having a discussion of a piece of choreography that they are working on collaboratively.

Brittany Hughes feels that she has a special relationship with her arts teachers in that “they feel more like friends,” which she suggests is important for creating the kind of teaching and learning environment that arts students need. She describes her teachers as “very interested in individuals’ creativity rather than like, you have to meet this curriculum.” Brittany compares teaching and learning in the specialized arts program to her more academic classes:

in a math class or something, if I’m not getting it, and the teacher’s like “why you aren’t getting it? I’m teaching it this way.” But like, like in an arts class, it’s like, “oh, you’re not really understanding it? Why don’t we try something else, or if this doesn’t, if this project doesn’t fit you, why don’t you try doing it like this?” And it’s sort of, I feel more … teachers are really responsive to like, the different levels of creat– not levels of creativity, but different, the different strength and weaknesses. They’re really in tune with the students.

Arts teachers also speak to the importance of “being in tune with the students,” which some attribute to their identification as artists. Visual arts teacher Ms. Salma Novell explains how being an artist influences her practice as a teacher:

everything that I practice in my own work is coming out in my teaching. Um, and I, and I think that everyone here is like that. You know, if you are a conceptual artist you will bring a lot more of sort of conceptual ideas to the table for your students; if you’re figurative artist your projects are going to be more figure based. Um, so that, all of those things that I kind of hone in, in my own work inadvertently coming out in the way that I teach the kids, and the way I demonstrate for them.

Negotiating roles of teacher and artist alongside the demands of the mandated curriculum and Rick Monette program’s mission can lead to tensions of philosophy in how arts education is carried out within the school. Ms. Mona Snow, a dance teacher in the Rick Monette program, describes one of these tensions as a contrast between creativity versus technical focus:

The students here are not as creative because they focus a lot on technique. Even when they create their own work, they still worry about how high they can kick, and how many turns they can do rather than what they’re actually creating and what they’re trying to say with their piece. Which is something that I find really disappointing. Its really hard for me to get them to create … all that kind of stuff that you don’t see as much here because they are so focused on training excellent dancers.

While teachers in the Rick Monette specialized arts program are appreciated for their identifications as artists, students also negotiate identifications not only as artists, but as teachers themselves. A new club at Sherwood Secondary School is dedicated to extending the value of an arts education beyond the borders of the school to less-privileged elementary schools around the city. Winnie Tam, a music student in the Rick Monette
program, describes why she feels that sharing arts with others is an important part of her arts education:

A lot of schools lack artistic courses, like elementary schools, like they have no music program or something. So, they’re very like, the first time we met them, they were so like, grateful for us, and they were like tearing, oh I was like, intensely emotional. But yeah, like it should be, a lot of people have different strengths, and some people have strength in arts. So, they probably learn better, if they have. I don’t know ... probably like if they have more variety and different courses, like if they get closer to the arts, they might like it. It might help them their futures career path, I don’t know.

The range of possibilities that the arts bring to the school is a crucial part of how the arts shape the teaching and learning atmosphere at Sherwood Secondary. Even as students, teachers, and administrators describe the challenges that the program presents, they generally demonstrate eagerness and enthusiasm about engaging these challenges and about the prospects for success that the program enables. At the same time, they all recognize that is not the arts alone, but the people – the students and teachers – who make the program thrive.

“The people are what makes it great”

While the presence of the Richard Monette program brings a particular quality to the school culture at Sherwood, for many of those interviewed, it is the people who inhabit the school that give it its character. For senior visual art major Limin Wong, it is the students that make the program:

They take initiative, they are leaders and they are very well, well-organized, they are well-grounded in a sense that they can do academics but at the same time, they are very involved in arts, and usually, they are very involved in extra curricular programs, like some people, they are just sports, some people, they might be into like other things, you know. The Rickies, they can, they have aspects of everything, they are not just, they don’t just do this.

The “Rickies,” as most people refer to the students in the specialized art program, are variously described as “gifted,” “talented,” “engaging,” “hard workers,” “empowered,” “colorful,” “creative,” “privileged,” and “professional.” For Carl Cross, who began working in the administrative team at Sherwood only a few years ago, “the kids are what makes it great.” He explains, “I often will walk the hallways when kids are doing stuff, or they’re selling stuff, and they’re dancing, and they’re playing their music. You know? They’re nice, they’re good kids.”

With few breaks in between, Rickies are always abuzz with activities, moving along the spacious building with high energy and dynamism. Most of the students described being involved in many activities not only within, but also beyond the school, from part-time jobs to rehearsals with the Youth City Orchestra, dance lessons, or professional stage productions, students describe lives of incessant activity. Visual arts major Daniella Ingram states that the hard work is a good thing. She says, “when you are done, you’re like so proud of yourself. And, and actually [its] a really rewarding feeling.” She also believes that hard work prepares her for the future. “If you work hard in this school, then, if you learn
how to study and work hard in the future, ... like, you learn how to handle different situations, and it helps you.”

Beside her admiration for how hard the students work, Judith Chalke offers that kids are always having fun and have an encouraging and supportive attitude toward each other, something she finds unusual from her perspective as an administrator. Recalling a recent school-wide performance, she describes the atmosphere:

They were having fun, they were encouraging others positively, you know, the acts were great, ... there was no booing, none of that stuff like, they just support themselves. And I thought, “Wow!” Normally this could be like a very difficult night, but you just watch the kids and they’re having fun with it

Ms. Chalke admires the work that the teachers do with the students, noting that when teachers are in front of the performance event, the quality is extremely impressive and “their level of proficiency is up there.” Yet, she believes student organized events, such as the annual coffee house, show “the true character of the kids, when we’re all sitting back, and they’re taking ownership ... and they’re very good with each other.” Even when some students try to do things that they are not proficient at, others are supportive. Ms. Chalke explains: “some of the kids, where they would definitely be booed off the stage at other schools, you know, for what they were singing – I’m not saying all schools are like that – but these kids seem to have that, they know what to do, they know how to respect.” She continues, “the kids here have a level of professionalism about them, I really have to say that. They take ownership of the school in a positive manner and they do things that I’ve never seen kids do before. And it’s quite amazing to watch it.”

While most teachers admire and some describe feeling privileged to work with such students, for some, their level of expertise can translate into a particular attitude toward the teachers. “When I first got here,” says Ms. Chalke, “the kids told me that teachers couldn’t teach them because they knew more than the teachers, ... that they were all brilliant and that there was nothing for them to learn.

More than one teacher shared the experience of feeling challenged by the students, some times in a positive and others in a negative light. For Mr. Berg, the education that students receive outside of the classroom is one reason that students do not necessarily take the teachers seriously. He explains that some students, “won’t necessarily just accept what I say at face value, just because I am standing up in front of the classroom.” He describes how some students will challenge his instructions by saying, “Well, my, my other teacher said this,” or “How come I was taught all this stuff?” But for Mr. Berg, while this can be “a little daunting,” it is also a good part of teaching at Sherwood, “because it often leads to other discussions, and we can delve into the deeper meaning of things.” The students high level of training also means that the teachers can choose high levels for the repertoire, “at least a college level if not a university level,” explains Mr. Berg, as he concludes, “it’s challenging and also rewarding at the same time.”

Still, Mr. Berg notes that dealing with students’ egos can be challenging. He feels that some students “have been told by many, many people – because of their natural ability or because of their early studies – that they are very good, phenomenal, wonderful, God’s gift to music!” He underscores each descriptor with a certain cynicism mixed with frustration:
“it is hard for them to accept criticism of their playing.” Teacher Salma Novelle calls Rickies “I-know-kids.” She explains that “I-know-kids” are the students who, “as a part of their experience as a student, they have been pumped up to think that they do know and they can” and who have “people at home that are constantly reinforcing the fact that they are somehow, you know more elevated somehow than the average kid.”

For visual arts teacher Melinda Waters, being accepted to the Monette program underscores the students’ sense of entitlement. “I think that they’re very empowered, because just to get in to the school, they’ve already been said they’re good enough to get in, so they’re empowered, they have a role already in grade nine.” She feels that students are “coming in with a step up” feeling that they have “a golden pass to be here.” Drama teacher Ellen Briggs feels that the sense of entitlement encourages students to become complacent with their own work. She feels that students would maintain their level of commitment if they were required to demonstrate their proficiency more regularly. “I think I would almost like to see auditions, have them repeated after grade ten, so in order to stay in the program, the kids would have to re-audition.” She believes this would keep the students “hungry” for success and for the opportunities the program affords them. Recalling a conversation with a colleague, she notes that students have been “raised on a diet of dessert. So, Monette is not special for them anymore.”

Echoing the food metaphor, teacher Brenda Knight notes that many teachers look forward to working with Monette kids, as opposed to other Sherwood students who are not in the specialized arts program. She describes that for many teachers, “collegiate” students “are not the dessert, they are the meat and potatoes,” a metaphor that also echoes the fact that the large majority of students at Sherwood are not in the Monette program. “They [the collegiate students] are sort of the bread and butter, until we get the classes with the good students,” she explains and adds hesitantly, “it sounds awful, but it’s what you have to put up with to get the great kids ... as a Monette teacher, [collegiate students] are not much of a high priority.” Indeed, only some of the privileges afforded to the Monette students are shared with the other students at Sherwood. Ms. Waters describes the position of collegiate students at the school and says, “they have less of a voice, and I think that they feel like they’re less included.”

The lack of inclusion is felt beyond the limits of the Monette program. For instance, while both teachers and administrators praised the students for their leadership, some feel that, whether by default or by design, only the Monette students take up these opportunities. Pointing to the perception that Monette students dominate classroom discussions as well as extra-curricular activities, Rachel Michaels offers the annual student Fashion Show as an illustration:

In Fashion Show, for example, that they just had, you try out to be the models, and it’s not just about your figure, you have to be able to dance or choreograph the thing or whatever. I’m sure 80 percent or more of the people in Fashion Show have been from the Monette program. In fact, my daughter didn’t even try out because of that. She said “Oh, all the dancers from Monette will get the parts,” even though she’s taken dance for ten years!

As a parent, Ms. Michaels notes the irony that while Monette students are only about 20 percent of the school, “when we have meetings or hear about things, you’d think it was
80 percent of the school.” Some students echo this observation. Dance major Morna Jacobs points out that school and student productions in general, and the popular Fashion Show in particular, are “almost Monette run.” “I feel like if I came to the school, like not in the Monette program, I wouldn’t have enjoyed it. ... I feel like, that there’re a lot of things that if I wasn’t in the Monette program, I’d be like, ‘oh, I wish I could do that.’”

Aware of the apparent inequality between “collegiate” and “Rickies,” the school initiated the Equity Coalition Group as a way to address the problem and develop strategies, such as expanding performance opportunities for all students at Sherwood. Besides the expansion of performance and leadership opportunities, Ms. Michaels says that the Equity Coalition has brought “just an awareness that there could be talented kids in the collegiate program, and they have to be open-minded about it.” Still, some students feel that there are clear distinctions between the two groups of students at Sherwood. For Limin Wong, “the school a lot of times is pretty like, kind of segregated between the collegiate kids and the arts kids. And like, for a reason, because the arts kids, they have a certain program to stick to. But a lot of the time, it is like, um, we don’t really mix as much.” This is not to say that students don’t cross the apparent boundary between the two groups of students. Yet, the very fact that students describe crossing that boundary underscores the perception that one exists.

This boundary is accentuated programmatically. Only students admitted to the Rick Monette program are able to participate fully in the course offerings offered through the arts program. However, collegiate students are able to take specific arts courses that are offered as electives, provided that they fit on their schedule. The offerings vary from one discipline to another, and while some teachers – particularly in the visual arts – feel that there are no differences between the way they teach different classes based on what students are in it, others feel that the differences between collegiate and Monette students are too significant to ignore. This is particularly evident when students and teachers talk about the few students from ethnic minorities at Sherwood.

Dance major Chanya Anderson explains that the friends she describes as “urban,” most of whom are not in the Monette program, don’t typically hang out at the school, preferring instead to spend their free time at the nearby mall. Chanya makes a distinction between her “artsy” and her “urban” friends, and she comments that many of her “urban” friends, also think of Rickies as “snobs,” and often note that she was not like most Monette students. Spending time outside the school, it becomes evident that there are many more visible minority students at Sherwood than there are within the Monette program, with the sole exception of the large number of students from Asian countries in the music program. According to the school administration, there is also a large group of Persian students who are recent immigrants and who are not Monette students. These students are only visible in very specific spaces inside the school – under stairwells or in small hallways on the second floor, away from the main areas of the school – and outside the school, where they can often be found hanging out on the sidewalk or walking toward the mall.

Teacher Brenda Knight, who has had the opportunity to teach some of these students, feels that there are “some Persian kids and there are some Black kids who are poorer, and I think they are marginalized in school to such a degree that lately they have
become pushy, vocal, aggressive, and so on.” She feels that this is “something we should be actively searching out ways to negotiate,” noting that while “we talk about multiculturalism, and that’s a very pretty word, ... we don’t talk about what it means when a Black kid and a Persian kid have a conflict in the school and have the repercussions, you know, trickle through.” She continues, “we don’t talk about the Persian kids sitting together, and the black kids sitting together, and the Asians, and so on. We’re not going there as a school.” Ms. Knight confirms that these students are less visible in the school because they tend to leave the school when they are not in class:

They are not here for any school activities, when they have lunch I believe they go straight to the mall, just to get off school property ... they come back for afternoon classes and then they just go. They have no connections, they aren’t doing the activities, they aren’t doing the sports, not doing the clubs, not doing whatever for financial reasons or whatever, it’s such a financial output to exist in this school.

Ms. Knight’s concern for the well-being of all the students at Sherwood is also evidence of the dedication that the teachers at the school bring to their work. Indeed, if the energy and enthusiasm that students bring to the school are what fill the schools with “spirit,” everyone believes that it is the teachers that make the program excellent. Teachers in the Monette program in particular are regarded as special because of their background in the arts and their impressive level of skill in their particular discipline. Many of the teachers in the arts, in fact, continue to work as professional artists. As one administrator puts it, “you’ve got teachers who are so talented that they can also bring the kids to that level and they can let the kids go with that creativity and encourage it.” She remarks on the selectivity of the faculty, “it’s not anyone who can teach in that program.”

Some of the teachers in the Monette program identify strongly as artists. For music teacher Joseph Jorgsten, “seventy percent of my work, I feel myself being an artist, and a conductor, and a musician.” When standing in front of an ensemble, Mr. Jorgsten explains, “it is not much of the feeling of teacher to student, it is a feeling of conductor to musician.” He adds, “the task of teacher is very much on the side.” For visual art teacher Salma Novelle, her teaching practice is wrapped in how she thinks of herself as an artist: “When I do demonstrations for them, you know, demonstrations that I’m doing as an artist not as a teacher on the blackboard.”

Students value their teachers’ artistic background and identify them as such. As a visual arts student explains:

the teachers ... are not teachers. They are artists, right? They began in doing arts by themselves. They were like, began with teachers, then, they went to arts. So, a lot of time, it is not like class, classroom structure, it is not as like, it is not like, “hello, today, we are going to do this,” and they are gone to talk, it is not like that. It is a lot of more abstract; it is a lot of more independent. They just come around and kind of guide you. So, you got to really treat them not as a teacher but as companion, like as friend to help you out.

Some teachers are ambivalent about whether they would call themselves artists, qualifying their responses. Music teacher Stephen Astor suggests that there are no straightforward answers to the question, saying that “it depends on how you want to define it [artist].” He adds, “I probably have [called myself an artist], but I don’t think of myself as
a professional player, not at all, no.” For visual art teacher Melinda Waters, “it’s tricky sometimes, we used to say ‘I make art,’ you know, I’m – I don’t say I’m an artist, I make art, so I think it’s different.”

Whether or how they think of themselves as artists, most of the teachers recognize that the association with the label is an important status marker within the context of the Monette program. For Mr. Astor, being a professional player is important. Speaking about a colleague whom he considers a professional player and who “everybody respects … every move he makes,” he explains, “when you see somebody who knows what they’re doing, they can, you know, can dominate the situation just by the virtue of that.” By contrast, he observes that students are less receptive to – and sometimes less respectful of – teachers who are not recognized as professional artists. Ms. Waters laughs about the question of whether teachers are artists or not; “It’s so funny, it’s all kind of about ego too, it’s really funny.”

Whether artists or not, teachers in the Monette program have a range of views about the purpose of an education in the arts. “Every teacher will have their own interests,” explains Keith Bell, “so their interests will drive where the curriculum, or how the curriculum is being delivered.” One important way in which teachers diverge is on whether they focus on the artistic process or on the product. For instance, dance teacher Mona Snow describes the “old school ballet” that some teachers engage as “very strict,” noting that things “must be this way, and must be that way, and there is just no movement there.” By contrast, for drama teacher Charlie Dyer, the product “really seems to be almost secondary.” Observing that many of the Monette students “already have the talent to do the product,” he explains, “if they go directly to the product, then they are relying on what they already know, whereas the process introduces new ideas and possibilities … that’s really where the learning takes place.” Likewise, for Bonnie Johnston, dance should be about more than acquiring skills:

Dance education is something that everyone can benefit from. Just in terms of health, and just getting active, and feeling comfortable with your body, and looking at your body in a different way, and seeing what it can do, and marvelling in that. Seeing how you can take an idea or a thought, and how you can express that through movement, and seeing how rich of a vocabulary dance really can be.

While teachers may defer on whether and how they consider themselves artists or on their visions of the purpose of education in the arts, all teachers in the Monette program shared and spoke abundantly about their commitment to their work as arts teachers. These commitments sometimes translate into a sense of working too hard. In order to meet the high expectations they have put on themselves, teachers work extremely hard and long hours. As a new teacher, Brenda Knight describes:

I’m doing 55-65 hour weeks. I work every day. I’m here by mostly eight in the morning, and I don’t usually leave ’til about five-thirty, six. If I’m lucky, I take home two or three hours of work at night. I work at least one day on the weekend, usually two, so I do an additional six, eight, ten hours on the weekends.

These demands sometimes lead teachers to feel exhausted and overwhelmed with the heavy workload. “This job can eat you up,” explains Ms. Chalke, noting the importance of “finding a balance” and learning “to let go and realize that you’re not going to get
everything done when you want it done." For Ms. Knight, the work hard work is rewarding on the short run. “I am fascinated with it,” she explains, “I love the kids.” But she is not sure that she can commit to the work in the long term. As she contemplates her future, she notes, “there is no way I can give the output that it demands, there is no way.”

For some teachers, the reward for their hard work is delayed until students return and are able to recognize how much they learned and how they appreciate their efforts. “I think often times I have to keep reminding myself that it’s a process, and sometimes the results that we are all seeking don’t happen overnight,” explains Mr. Berg, “you have to let the kids grow.” He observes that the rewards sometimes come unexpectedly; “sometimes it takes a few years for that happen ... I think that’s the hardest part of being a teacher, is that you have to realize that everyone is growing at a different pace and you have to be patient.”

“The best of both worlds”

Sherwood Secondary is housed in a lavish $30 million building, which was built in 1996. The building has three floors and a basement, for a total of 310,000 square feet. The original school was built in the 1920’s, but it was demolished to make way for a new building, with the exception of Gardner Hall, the school main stage. This is important, because it symbolizes the centrality of arts to the school, as described earlier. The building was designed with the arts program in mind and it was structured around the needs of the arts program: five rooms dedicated to music, as well as a series of practice rooms; three visual art studios, as well as a photo lab and photography room; a black box theatre, and two dance studios, are among some of the additional resources available to students in the Monette program as well as to Sherwood students who are able to take arts electives. The range of resources is in part related to the sheer size of the school, which is one of the largest in the system, but it is also specifically related to the remarkable investments made by parents, the school board, and other community supporters to the arts program. For instance, in addition to the $100,000 assigned to each specialized program in the board, the school has also established a Sherwood Foundation for the express purpose of refurbishing the large main stage. In addition, Monette students pay an annual fee to cover expenses related to materials and additional resources.

The sense that the school provides a wealth of resources and opportunities is evidenced in the way teachers, students, and administrators alike describe the place. This is a place with many resources where there are opportunities for everyone. In describing Sherwood and the Monette program as a mall, students and teachers communicate the sense that it is a place where there is something for everyone, and everyone has multiple choices. Senior dance major Gretchen Brown says that she and her parents were excited about the range of opportunities available at Sherwood. “I’m kind of a really big nerd,” she explains, “and I really like math and science and [my parents] thought it would be really good opportunity for me to take, like some like, take arts in school because I also really like arts.” Gretchen says she is not sure whether she would be taking any arts courses if she were not able to major in one arts discipline.
Daniella Ingram is finishing her first year at Sherwood as a visual arts major, and she is excited about the range of opportunities she will have in the coming years.

Next year, I’m allowed to take a photography elective so, I’m excited about that. And just, um, this year, I didn’t really take full advantage of like, all the clubs and councils I can be in. I am in quite a few, but I would like to do even more next year. And just like volunteering in different things, um, since I think I’m gonna have more time next year because um, grade 11 and 12 is really hectic because that’s when you’re really trying to get really good marks to get into a good university. But grade 10, of course, I wanna get good marks, but I think I’ll have more time to just like, enrol myself like visual arts council, arts council and like, different things, like front of house and all those volunteer clubs, so, I wanna do that.

The large student population brings the school to life with its vivacious energy, filling virtually every corner of the school. Wearing the latest styles and brand names, students organize themselves spatially by arts major, grade, language, gender, and ethnicity, creating complex orders of cliques that are only easily decipherable to those who have become a part of the Sherwood school culture. Students in the Richard Monette specialized arts program are known for their high degree of academic as well as artistic excellence, and special enrichment sections of courses such as math and English are offered to “Monette kids only.” With their private tutors, and extra-curricular training, some teachers suggest it is no surprise that the Monette kids do well. “All those kids are high achievers,” says Judith Chalke, “if they’re in Rick Monette, they are often carrying more credits, and they’re committed, and they’re trying hard, and that’s probably a gross generalization too, ... so, they’re good kids.”

Well aware of the social context of the school, Ms. Chalke also adds nuance to her admiration for the students, noting that while the kids are “very, very good kids, high academic,” this is at least partly related to their socio-economic status:

What does Alfie Kohn say, you can see how successful kids are going to be based on the size of the houses in the area, right? And this is a very affluent area, and the kids do well ... we have very [few] applied level sections here. Now, mind you, that’s partly because the parents won’t allow their kids to pick applied level courses, right? They’re going to be doctors, lawyers, engineers.

Another teacher in the music department describes the Monette music students as “well parented:” “I feel that these, the bulk of our students are very well parented. What I mean is that their parents are very well involved in their lives and they are very concerned about um, about their education in general and about their music education in particular:”

With a 98 percent rate of university admission post-graduation, Sherwood Secondary seems to meet the concerns of professional parents and students who aim for well-rounded success. The school has been de-semestered to allow for the creative needs of the Monette classes, so that talents can develop over the course of a full year rather than restricted to five-month blocks.

School administrator Carl Cross observes that the “type of kid that goes to school here ... [seems] to be involved in lots of things and it seems to be very cool to be involved.” This is part of the spirit that teachers and administrators say characterizes the school, a place where students are eager participants in the range of opportunities available to them. Some students even seem to want more. When asked what she would change about the
program, Brittany Hughes explains: “have it all arts, I guess!” She wishes she did not have to choose one arts major in grade 9 and wants “more opportunities to, to experience like, all of the arts.”

While students are limited in their ability to explore the arts beyond their chosen major, they do have many opportunities to explore a range of experiences within their discipline. Music majors have a wide range of performance ensembles to gain experiences. As music teacher Anthony Berg puts it, Monette “is certainly a very exciting program. There is certainly, if the student chooses to, there are many, many opportunities to discover music in all sorts of levels, in all sorts of genres. It is again, very exciting.” Drama teacher Ellen Briggs describes the many opportunities that partnerships with outside arts organizations bring to the program. “We started off at high end,” she explains. “We went to Shaw Festival and Stratford. We are now going to Soul Pepper, so smaller and more intimate.” As a teacher, she wants drama students to understand that theatre is not all glamour. “We have so much money here,” she notes, as she highlight the importance of students getting a range of perspectives on drama work:

We are then going to be going to the Factory, which is a little bit more divey. And I want to take them to a real dive. I want to take them to one of those rented Palmerston Theatre or whatever. I want them to get a sense, because they just think Mamma Mia, those big Broadway productions ... I want them to see that magic starts small and that these are artists who are really hungry and will do whatever it takes.

Dance major Heather Stewart notes that the quality of the dance performances is not the only thing that is impressive about what happens in the dance program at Sherwood. She comments on the “student input,” noting that there are “a lot of opportunities for the students, and like some shows like, students can choreograph.” Heather also appreciates the importance that the school places on the balance between academics and the arts. Now in grade 11, she is “impressed by the, like the output in what the students have learned, and just a lot of people I’ve talked [to] have really positive feedback, and they’ve liked the program, like it adapts well for them, like they get to dance and also they get all the academics at the same time. So, it’s like the best of both worlds, almost.”

The “almost” resonates with the way Daniella’s parents feel about academics at Sherwood. Despite being recognized for the high academic achievement of its students, Daniella says her parents “think that the academics aren’t really strong enough for them.” She feels that her parents expect her to “work really, really on academics and stuff.” While she says she does care about academics, she has a clear sense about her future:

I know whatever I do, when I grow up, will be arts-related, so, I tend to focus on that more. But my parents think it’s like, right now at this age, they really want me to do well in science and math, and all the stuff. So, I guess for them, like they’d rather make that like harder but they’re happy that I am happy.

Parents have a great deal of influence on the range of resources and opportunities available to Sherwood students. Parents contribute though their involvement in several parent organizations, including a very active parent council and the Sherwood Foundation. The majority of students in the arts program supplement their training with classes outside
of the school, mostly in private studios, but also through arts organizations in the city, such as the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra, a very selective and prestigious youth group.

Despite the sense of being in a resource-rich school, some teachers, particularly those who have had the opportunity to work with both Monette students as well as Sherwood students who are not in the arts program, or “Collegiates” as they are often called, observe the limitations. One teacher notes that Monette students have a sense of entitlement to the resources available to them: “they are special because they get told they are special ... and I pull resources and energy and effort into them.” Yet, she notes with a sense of apprehension, “my grade 9 applied kids were special too, they just didn’t get any of that stuff.” This sense that Monette students have privileged access to resources and opportunities is evident also in some of the administrative challenges that the program presents. For administrator Judith Chalke, it manifests in the challenge of scheduling. “It causes so much work,” she explains, “because the timetable is controlled for 200 kids,” yet it has consequences for all students. For Ms. Chalke, the inequality is related to the fact that while some students are only at Sherwood for the academics, the Monette students benefit the most from the resources of the arts program. She explains,

Monette kids do their Arts, but then they also do English together, and they believe it’s taught like an enriched English. So ESL kids cannot be in Monette, kids who are applied level cannot be in Monette. So it creates this elitist, you know, because it’s not open to everybody, really.

Keith Bell is deeply committed to the future of the program and would like to envision “new directions” and a wider source of resources. As a teacher in the Monette program, he is well aware of the kinds of initiatives that other arts high schools are taking to explore new opportunities, and he wishes Sherwood had the resources to take a more prominent role in innovation: “basically just being the leader in the arts in terms of new directions … that’s where we fall in behind in terms of new directions.” For Mr. Bell, the demands of an already successful program and the expectation to keep an attractive academic program place limits on their ability to innovate:

One of the issues that we’ve been, you know, you are always, you are always advocating for staffing, more money, more anything, right? Because you find that they’ve cut back everything on the last number of years. ... Because we are higher academic school we have a higher staffing ratio over all the other schools. I mean that hurts us in a sense. All of our classes have to be large, even in the arts, ... we are trying to keep, keep a cap at twenty-five. But to make it really work we are putting up to thirty, thirty-two sometimes, in classes.

The size of the school also raises concerns about isolation for some teachers and administrators. Yolanda Kumani feels a certain distance from the students in her administrative role. “The kids almost count on the fact that they are anonymous in this building,” she explains:

In other schools, kids usually feel that they want to have some connection with administration. [Sherwood students] like to be invisible to us. They’ll come to us when they need certain things, but it’s a different kind of dynamic where they respect you in your administrative role, ... but they don’t want to establish those alliances unless it is that reference letter they need from there, or if they’re in difficulty or in trouble. Well, I can say in other schools, there’s a quicker connection to kids, even when you worked at the administrative level.
For Mr. Bell, the future of the program may depend on its ability to establish close links with the business community, something he says other similar schools have done effectively. While he is not sure whether the current leadership of the program can take on this task, he suggests that this might be an important future step. Other schools, he says, have so much in terms of industry, or the arts involved in terms of money coming into the school.

... A lot of it is private funding, not that they have to give back directly to their funding. So they do a lot of fund raising in the business community to develop a program. I think, that’s where it goes. ... [Some schools] have a website where you can go and you can see they’ve, they’ve set it up like, you know a business type of thing.

Along with some of the program administrators, Mr. Bell envisions the possibility of having a Board of Directors for the Monette program, made of community advisors that would “give you sort of opinions about directions of the program in terms, from the arts community, and stuff as a whole.”

**The Designer Label**

The end of the Fall term and the beginning of the school vacation is punctuated with the Holiday assembly. Despite the large size of the main stage, two assemblies are necessary to accommodate not just the sheer number of students, but the long list of performers. The space is abuzz with the combined excitement of seeing everyone perform and the thought of two weeks without school. The program is a diverse mix of rock, punk, and alternative bands, solo performances, screen arts projects, and student choreographies. Earlier in the week, the string orchestra performed holiday music in the school’s main foyer, and the visual arts students rotated the work in display in the art gallery. As the second assembly concludes, the students have already begun to leave for their school vacation. Student bodies are sparse in the hallways, which seem unusually littered with notebooks and scraps of lunch unwanted left behind. The maintenance staff assesses the work ahead as some remaining students and adults linger behind. Ellen Briggs walks down from the Rick Monette office toward the school main office, noting the shifting atmosphere of a school at the verge of vacation, and comments, “it keeps changing!”

Music teacher Anthony Berg describes his view of the idea behind the Richard Monette program:

I think the idea behind Richard Monette, the philosophy behind Richard Monette is an opportunity for arts minded students to explore their particular craft, and maybe even other arts disciplines, at a very profound level, so that they can actually continue to pursue that in a post secondary education. Or they can take that education into whatever field, whatever field they choose to study. I think that’s the general philosophy of Richard Monette.

This “general philosophy” is directly related to the strong presence of the arts at Sherwood and the sense that the Monette program is the “cherry on the ice cream,” as a school that is well resourced to offer opportunities for everyone. It is also what attracts the dedicated faculty and the talented students that bring life and excitement to the school.
Visual arts teacher Jeff Howell explains that the quality of the students is related to the attention that parents and students pay to their school choices. “Usually parents and students are doing their homework, they know about this school. This school has apparently a reputation and a good reputation. And so, and parents shop, you know? So we get good students.” Mr. Howell comments that some parents see Sherwood as an alternative to expensive private schools. “If they’re not going to a private school,” he notes, “they like to send them here.” Ms. Briggs echoes the sense that the reputation of the school brings in parents and students that are very conscious about the quality of the school. “There’s no doubt in my mind that when you look at test results, it reflects the socioeconomics of the neighborhood.” She explains that this is partly why the students are so successful: “The kids tend to be bright and educated, and have taken their music lessons and have had dance lessons and so on and so forth,” and she adds, “I think a lot of the parents use this as a private school ... more of a status symbol.” The sense that the school provides a good product and that its name carries important weight for students’ futures is expressed in the idea that the school is “the designer label.”

Of course, the glossy image of the school as “wonderland” is also filled with the complexities of a school serving one of the largest student populations in one of North American’s largest and most diverse metropolitan areas. The layered dynamics that bring life to this “wonderland” are filled with inspiration and tensions, challenges and opportunities, and the lustre as well as the messiness that comes attached to any educational endeavour. Despite its reputation, Sherwood and the Rick Monette program are always in transition, even changing. For Keith Bell, this is the biggest challenge facing the program. He wonders if as the school will be able to “ensure that what we deliver is in fact a really strong delivery of program ... not just the status quo.” He recognizes the accomplishments and the reputation of the school: “I would think Toronto is probably one of the most progressive boards in this province and that, and that we have been pretty, well, the leader within the board. ... We tend to deliver more. So you are always trying to, in all the arts programs trying to get the people to do something that goes beyond just the regular program in terms of the arts.”
York Vocational School

“Trying to Make a Statement About the World,” “A Matter of Emphasis,” and “Like Separate Worlds”

Zahra Murad & Sarah Switzer

The sprawling campus of York Vocational School is situated at a busy inner-city intersection and houses arts, tech, vocational, and academic programs. The school houses the oldest specialized arts program in the Toronto District School Board, which focuses only on the visual arts. The program is housed in a separate building across from the school’s main building, where most other classes are held. Due to this physical and symbolic divide, the arts building has developed a culture and a history all of its own, connected to but also apart from the rest of YorkVoc. Currently, York’s art program is at a defining moment in its history. As four out of six of its established arts faculty stand on the verge of retirement, the question of York’s approach to art, arts pedagogy, and the community of artists it has created becomes immediate and fraught.

As a result, the teachers and students at York’s art program are constantly engaged in a process of meaning-making around concepts of the artist and what it means to belong to a community of artists or art students. What kinds of students and what kind of art is promoted at YorkVoc is determined by ideas of what constitutes art and who is deemed an artist. Drawing on the data collected through interviews and observations at this school, this section will explore important ways in which discursive conceptions of art, the artist, and communities of art students combine to shape the climate and the everyday functioning of the art program.

This section of the report is divided into two sections: Part One – The Production of the Artist, and Part Two – Community Tensions. While both sections were composed separately, each section speaks to the other. For example, section one provides context for the community tensions described in section two. In fact, such tensions would not exist if it were not for ambivalent understandings about who constitutes an artist within the York community. Our experience at York was marked by more teacher than student engagement with the project. While we were fortunate to interview the majority of art teachers, we only interviewed a handful of students. As a result, any discussion of student themes within
York must be viewed as being partial – both because research is always partial, but also because we were not able to gain access to a diverse sample of students. In fact, due to several constraints on our ability to collect data at York, this chapter has a somewhat different character from others in this report, which are more descriptive and contain more varied voices. Nonetheless, we feel that we were able to collect enough data to tell an important story that adds nuance to the overall impression of urban arts high schools this report provides. We ask that you keep this in mind as you read the following pages.

“A matter of emphasis” – The Production of the Artist:

The office of the Assistant Curriculum Leader for the arts serves as the main office for the visual art program at York. It is a large room with high windows and stacks, piles, and clusters of art. The room feels crammed as the art faculty join for a meeting to introduce the research project. They accommodate themselves into the available space between stacks of canvas, art equipment, and general office debris. As we introduce the research project to the staff, the teachers speak about the quality of York’s visual art program, about the process of gaining official status as an arts program, and about the fact that most of the teachers are practicing artists. It becomes clear that who or what an artist should be – or, more specifically, who or what an artist should or can be taught to be – is a source of tension, debate and possibility within the program.

The teachers at York, whether they identify as artists who teach or as teachers of art, must contend with the messy and complicated notion of what the terms “art” and “artist” mean in real and immediate ways. Indeed, if the teachers did not follow a personal philosophy with regards to this grey area, their jobs would be impossible. As a teacher at York, it seems impossible to escape the awareness that teaching art means teaching a specific approach to art. During an interview, Sadler Langley, a sculpture and painting teacher notes: “it’s not a matter of one thing or the other, it’s a matter of emphasis.”

Different teachers at York – as educators and as artists – have differing ideas of and priorities for the outcomes of art education. These divergent ideas turn upon four overlapping points of specific tensions regarding the meaning and manifestation of the construction of the artist and the art they produce. These include: (1) the artist and art as existing for arts’ sake alone, versus existing in order to fulfil a social function; (2) the artist as outside of or counter to the norms of social behaviour and regulation; (3) the artist as part of a long tradition of skill and technique, versus as part of a current political moment; (4) the artist as someone nurtured and taught, versus as someone whose skills and inclinations are innate.

Teachers seemed to hold firmly to one or another “side” of each of these four points constituting the definition of “artist.” All of the teachers and students who spoke to what they believe an artist to be, however, demonstrated a measure of uncertainty or tension within their definition, even when their thoughts were passionately held and carefully considered.
For example, Mr. Langley’s words illustrate several strong connections between his ideas of the artist, student, and teacher that were consistent with other teachers and students. Mr. Langley spoke in detail about his perceptions of what kind of an artist arts education should be looking to produce, and of the challenges that this kind of arts education faces today. Discussing trends in teaching, he speaks to points one and two of what makes a good artist and good arts education:

Uh, I think that I, I’m old school. In the sense that I came from a, a background where there’s craft and, uh, hands-on kind of hard training and design training. Today it’s more, the whole thing is much more academic, it’s more about ideas, content-oriented uh, rationale, rather than, you know … they’re trying to teach you how, what an artist is as opposed to how to make art. And, uh, so … all the people of my generation still have that grounding and sort of take on it. While the new generation young people coming in … they’re much more geared to narrative, you know, story, and … trying to uh solve the problems of the world through painting, or making art, or doing some kind of artistic-somewhat activity, they’re trying to make a statement about the world contribute to that. You know … there is a transition in that kind of language, right, I’d say that contemporary modern teachers won’t have a, won’t have a vocabulary uh, formal vocabulary, they’ll have a vocabulary of I – of whatever, the academics study, programs in art, social history, politics all that, that’s the language they’ll be wanting to speak.

Mr. Langley works hard to keep his opinion value-neutral, stating a few times through the interview that there is no right way to be an artist. The definition he is drawing here is about who is and who is not an artist, and about what he sees as an evolving notion of art and the artist. He feels strongly about a craft-based, skills-oriented, art-for-arts-sake approach that simultaneously situates the artist outside of regular and regulated society and aligns them with skilled labour such as might be found in traditional trades. The distinction he makes between content and product, between being an artist and making art, suggests that he feels it is possible to act in a value-neutral manner, or to teach value-neutral craft, to which meaning can be ascribed after the point of action rather than before or throughout. This implication, combined with his emphasis on skill suggests an artist situated as an observer, a skilled labourer, a part of an historic tradition and a community unto themselves. This view is consistent with the initial history of the art program at York and the fact that it is still housed within a vocational school.

However, although Mr. Langley makes a clear distinction between what he views to be academic, which he links to a lack of hands-on skill and to general abstraction, and what qualified his preferred approach to art, he also asserts that good students make good artists:

Our best visual arts students also happen to be our most intellectually oriented and, you know, they’re good writers, it usually all goes together. You do, and … I have seen, and I have exceptional visuals arts students with exceptional skills in art, but because they have no intellectual curiosity, no uh, no, no real life of the mind so to speak, uh, it doesn’t really take them very far.

Mr. Langley believes that a good artist will likely also be a good academic student. Although he may imagine an artist as standing outside some forms of social regulation, he believes artists must have intellectual curiosity. In keeping with the alignment between art and the technical trades, Mr. Langley also notes: “I can take the most basic person and teach
them something, you know. You can always learn.” This implies that art itself is a skill and not an innate capability that one either does or does not have. And yet, at the same time, he describes the inability to acquire any particular art skill as a possible learning disability. Rather than articulating the inability to acquire skills as linked to an innate lack of artistic ability, Mr. Langley describes this as a lack of capacity, saying “some people will never learn it, ‘cause they have an actual learning disability that doesn’t allow them to learn it.”

Mr. Langley is not the only person to make a clear distinction between art and academics. Several of the teachers describe, albeit in differing ways, art education as a unique endeavour in teaching. Centering on their approaches to the four overlapping points of friction in the construct of the artist, many teachers and students express a sense of tension, incompatibility, or uncertainty around the teaching of art in traditional classroom settings. The ambivalence around what an artist should be reveals itself most at the site at which the artist, student, and teacher meet: the classroom.

Mr. Langley remarks firmly that he sees himself as an artist, and not as a teacher. He says he would never consider teaching any other subject and adds that he is uninterested in his students as anything other than artists. Expanding on his identity as an artist and his approach to art education, Mr. Langley remarks, “[m]y view is that what you make your art about is a personal thing, it’s not something I should be teaching you, its something you should, you have to figure out for yourself.” Mr. Langley describes educators as people who are, to various degrees, interested in guiding their students as people. As an artist who teaches, however, he feels disinterested in this pursuit, and focuses instead on passing on his knowledge of his art as craft.

Avital Stavi also expresses the belief that teaching art is unlike teaching in other disciplines. She explains that a “big part of the – our lessons are going to be on feedback that involves somehow the teacher actively demonstrating their ideas ... through doing. So, I think that you’re able to do that as a teacher only if you practice yourself.” Like Mr. Langley, she views the artist as closely related to a skilled labourer or professional. She views art as an end in itself, and so is adamant about the need for teachers of art to be artists, and not simply trained in teaching art:

> You see, these people are professionals in their fields and this is what, one thing that we are looking for, not just a teacher that went to, let’s say post-secondary, university, got their university degree and ... maybe not even majored in art, necessarily but has some art credentials. So then they chose to teach art, one of their teachables as visual art. You know, we’re looking for – most of the teachers that come, came ... practicing as artists, as photographers, as, as architects, as, uh, you know, graphic designers uh, and then came to the school, and through the technical stream uh, they got their teaching certificate. The same ways that, let’s say, a plumber who wants to teach plumbing would get, or a construction worker or you know, people that are not necessarily coming from, uh, academic fields.

Like Mr. Langley, Ms. Stavi sees artists as nurtured rather than natural, as members of a tradition of art, and as an evolving entity. Like her colleague, she notes: “I think, for art, now they’re looking for more aca- for academics, rather than ... people that are coming from a professional field, and I think that that’s not a good decision.” Ms. Stavi and Mr. Langley both express their understanding of art education as skill-acquisition. In describing the need for art teachers to be practicing artists, Ms. Stavi describes the
importance of learning “how to draw through observing the process of drawing.” She suggests a right way to acquire and apply a skill through this argument. Ms. Stavi sees art and academia as separate entities, but does not view art as unquantifiable and without means of evaluation. Her conception of the relationship between art and education is closer to one of apprenticeship than of an academic pursuit.

Ms. Stavi has addressed the manifestations of these tensions in debates among the faculty. In her interview, she mentions a meeting regarding the introduction of some “newer” ideas in art and art education into the curriculum, but says the teachers involved in the meeting chose to maintain the traditional Bauhaus approach at the school. This discussion, and the tensions around art practice and what kinds of art practice should be taught, stem from differing definitions of the artist as apolitical, value-neutral, and steeped in tradition, versus the artist as an entity actively engaged in society, responding to current events, and experimenting with new forms. It also stems from a different understanding of or perspective on the tensions, incompatibility, or uncertainty of teaching art within a bureaucratic educational structure.

Abby Morgan feels very differently about the artist than Avital Stavi and Sadler Langley, but she too notes a certain uniqueness in and tension around the practice of teaching art in the classroom. Ms. Morgan is a relatively new addition to the YorkVoc faculty. She defines artists implicitly through her interview and, in many ways, does so with an opposite understanding to Mr. Langley and Ms. Stavi. In her interview, Ms. Morgan discusses being a student or teacher and being an artist as separate and sometimes conflicting occupations:

Um, there are some students who I think are absolutely wonderful, fantastic artists. Shitty students. And then there are some people who are just amazing students, like they’re really on top of their game ... um, they’re just really great academic students that don’t have uh, skill ... to really be a good artist.

Although Ms. Morgan does not explicitly imply that being a good student precludes being a good artist, she sees them as separate occupations, and ones that do not necessarily have an impact on one another.

Although there is not necessarily a direct link between one and the other, Ms. Morgan’s separation of student and artist is telling and reveals a perception of the artist that is different than Ms. Stavi’s or Mr. Langley’s. Ms. Morgan’s conception of the artist is subtly anti-academic, but in a rejection of the constrictions around academic undertakings, not in rejection of academic ideas themselves. In describing what defines a good student, she lists: “they’re early for every class; they hand in everything on time; they do their written part that goes with the painting part.” This description implies that being a good student is largely a matter of discipline and effort. Being an artist, however, is about having a skill or inborn ability – being the right type.

However, Ms. Morgan is not consistent with this element of her definition of the artist, stating later in her interview that even “having a huge drive and a desire to do something, and not any instructions, you know, you’re not gonna get the skill level that somebody, you know, as the same level as you would at a younger age.” This seems to
imply that artists can be nurtured, but the tensions and uncertainty evident in these descriptions suggest that both are possibilities. Regardless of whether art is nature or nurture, however, to Ms. Morgan, as with her colleagues, an artist and a student are not the same thing. However, unlike her colleagues who imply that although distinct, success as a student enables success as an artist, Ms. Morgan discusses the need to talk to “high school students a lot about balancing, being a good artist to being a good student.” This implies that these occupations might come into conflict with one another at times. She expands when she explains:

"I rely on those people over there [the main school building] hoping they trained them to be a good student, right? And then they come over here and I let them loosen up a bit ... I often have a saying, like I'll say, like, "okay, so I'm talking to you as an artist, I'm talking to you as an art student, know, like, get your shit together, hand in your project, because it's due on this date." This is art student time, right? When you're actually painting, that's when you're an artist, so that's kind of a tricky line to draw for them too, because, you want, like I said, you want to raise culture-fuckers anyways, right? Like you want them to go against the grain, that's what artists do, they question, they push, you know, they're avant-garde, means they're on the cutting edge, you're trying something new. As a teacher in the school system, ooh, do I really want to be encouraging this? You know, because, and I mean, the irony is, I used to teach Civics too, right, so it's like, oh both sides, in this class I'm saying, "go out there, raise some hell." You know, and in the other class I'm, "be a good citizen, boys and girls. You must obey the laws." You know, so as a teacher, I'm in the school pro-, in the school system, as an artist as well, it's tough to kind of, and I think we kind of get away with a lot here ... it's a little bit different than normal.

Within the nuances of acting simultaneously as teachers or students and as artists, Ms. Morgan lays out her perceptions of what an artist is. Unlike Ms. Stavi and Mr. Langley, she sees artists specifically as politically engaged people, as “culture-fuckers,” and as society's “avant-garde.” Art and artists, therefore, exist not for the sake of the craft alone but to fulfil a specific social function. It is interesting to note that among the teachers who disagreed with Ms. Morgan, feeling that art was an end in itself, was Achim Weller, who had a unique interpretation of his relationship to dominant perceptions of the artist. Mr. Weller explained that he does not consider himself an artist because, as he explains:

"I'm a designer, a photographer. It's not that what I do can't be considered artistic, but I – the things I create have purpose as opposed to, I don't even wanna say decorative, because that's demeaning to art, but, not purely for the sake of the piece. You know, it's, there's, there's a, it has to fit into a larger need.

Mr. Weller's body language and tone in answering this question – pulling back, speaking more quietly – suggests that he feels some strain in his definition of art, and his positioning with regards to it. In contrast, Ms. Morgan's views on art as active and engaged seem perhaps less popular among faculty at YorkVoc, and her approach to the conceptions of art and what it means to be an artist are in many ways unique among the view from YorkVoc's arts teachers.

Unlike Ms. Stavi and Mr. Langley, Ms. Morgan does not describe artists as an evolving category, but speaks of them as people naturally constructed with certain proclivities. An artist is not punctual, organized, complicit, quiet, or easy to regulate. As students, individuals must embody some or all of these characteristics, but as artists they can relax from fitting into these categories and explore the possibilities of their role as
social commentators. Because of these differences – and the corresponding differences in what she might wish to encourage as an artist versus as a teacher – Ms. Morgan makes a distinction between her identity as a teacher and as an artist, though for different reasons than Ms. Stavi and Mr. Langley.

Ms. Morgan’s perceptions of art as separate from and freer than academic schooling and Mr. Langley’s and Ms. Stavi’s understanding of art as a skilled profession are reflected in some students’ descriptions of their experiences in the classroom and, correspondingly, their impressions of what it is to engage in art or be an artist. Indeed, teachers were not alone in their ambivalence around the role of art in the classroom; perhaps picking up on their teachers’ tensions on the topic, students too seemed unsure about the role of art, and their role as artists.

The students we interviewed noted differences in teaching styles between faculty in the building. They articulated these differences by describing a particular teacher’s proclivities in assigning larger or smaller workloads, and – perhaps more importantly – their level of “strictness” or desire to see the fabrication of “correct” art products. Kassia Wade, a student in grade ten, echoed her teachers’ sentiments concerning the separation of arts and academia. “I think it’s good to still be learning the academics of like, science and English and math, and also get to, sort of, venture off into arts, and sort of lets you get a feel for what you like to do more, so, that’s good.” Although Kassia does not articulate feeling a tension between being a student in one building and being an artist-in-training in another, she does note a difference. Her language implies that “venturing off into arts” might be looked at as more exploratory, perhaps freer, while being an academic student is more about receiving information. She says,

Yeah, the academic teachers really like to, I don’t know, maybe they like to mark work or something, they’re always giving you all kinds of homework, and work to do in class, and they’re really busy, I find. Um, whereas the teachers here [in the arts program] are sort of more about just teaching how to do the skills, so then you can do it on your own. Um, in the main building, it’s sort of, it’s more academic, so it’s all about doing work and marking work, and improvements. Where, it’s like that here too, but, it’s sort of more busy over there, you get, you get a lot of work in the art department too, but, I don’t know.

Kassia’s comments reflect a sense of confusion around what exactly her role as an artist or as a student, or as a combination of both might be. It seems clear in her articulation that there is a difference between academics and art, but just what that difference is, is difficult to pin down. Like her teachers, Kassia names this ambivalence through experiences in the classroom, describing art both as freer and more self-guided than academic classes and yet, in the same interview, adding,

Probably my toughest classes would be my art classes, ’cause it is a specialized program, so you do have to meet the requirements and everything, um, and just getting your project done is a really long process, ’cause you have to keep checking it over and making corrections. A lot of people would think that it’s just art, it’s not that hard, but really it is, if you um, want to like, please the teacher, and do it correctly, and learn the skills, it’s pretty hard.

Like Kassia, grade eleven student Chris Elliot spoke to the tensions existing between art as a free-flowing practice, stemming naturally from within a student, and art as a
learned skill, with an objectively understandable “right” and “wrong” way of being done. Chris compares his ceramics and photography classes. In ceramics, Chris says, “you can kind of pretend you’re doing something when you’re not and then just, have fun and goof off more but like, still be learning.” On the other hand, “photography is like a whole bunch of steps that you have to follow like, precisely but, like, it all has to like, work, otherwise you screw up for you and that’s a drag.” It would be too simple to dismiss these distinctions, which indicate a preference for the freer environment of ceramics, as merely stemming from laziness. The differences Chris notes as important between these classes as based on the needs of two disparate mediums are echoed in later comments about teaching styles and approaches to art itself. But while Chris expresses that photography is tricky but “all right,” he is quite clear about the desirability of one approach to art training over another. Talking about the teacher’s approach in life drawing, a class he says he dislikes, he says,

She made us draw a whole bunch of things and then ... she’s like “okay, you’re doing it completely wrong.” And it’s like, what?! ... I mean, I guess that’s gonna help us learn. I mean, obviously it is but, ... she’s always on your back, like, making you do different things and then, when you think you’re doing it right, you’re doing it wrong. ... It’s not like it hurts your feelings, but it’s like “okay, okay, okay, okay!” And then like, she’ll, you’ll be like drawing and you’ll see her coming around, slowly coming to you, and then you’re like all trying to do it how you’re supposed to.

It is interesting to note the similarities between the teachers that students identifies as being controlling or smothering in their approach to artistry, and the teachers who identified art and teaching art as a trade rather than an academic subject. These differences of approach may be the logical results of different approaches to the four major points of tension playing out in the classroom, and being received by students with greater or lesser degrees of fondness. Regardless, it is clear that for both teachers and students, the classroom is a site of anxiety or pressure, as theory is turned into practice and art meets education.

Whether it is outright tension or the subtle uneasiness of doing-without-really-knowing that is being felt by teachers/artists or students/artist-in-training, there is a sense of indecision that marks the carrying out and reception of the art curriculum at York Vocational. This operates on teachers and students in many ways, both positive and negative. It creates a space in which the question of who or what is an artist, is constantly being asked; a space in which what it is to be an artist is an evolving concept. However, teachers and students are not engaged in this process of meaning-making on equal terms. Everybody has their approach to what it means to be an artist, but some voices and opinions are heard and acted upon, while others are dismissed or tuned out. In the context of an art program, embodying what it means to be an artist can mean inclusion in the community created around that term. But what happens if students or teachers do not adequately embody notions of the artist deemed “right” or “better” within the context of the school? And how do various social factors, such as race, class, and gender, guide or determine both the ways in which teachers and students resolve their definitions of what it means to be an artist and the way in which students are recognized or rejected as artists? The following section will attend to these questions by exploring how teachers and
students resurrect gendered, raced, and classed boundaries when discussing the York Vocational arts community.

“Like separate worlds” — Community Tensions

From speaking with teachers and students, the theme of community emerged as a central theme in the research. Community, however, did not exist without tension. Teachers often described the student community as a “mixed bag,” while students offered commentary on an inclusive community that did not always correlate with what was more evident through observations of the school. For example, teachers’ descriptions suggested that certain students were more valuable to the community than others, thus creating an exclusive school culture, premised on racial and class hierarchies, as well as neoliberal principles of meritocracy and success. Meanwhile, when students described their peers, they erected similar boundaries, marking out art students from the larger York Vocational School community in ways that mapped onto pre-existing racial and class hierarchies. The following section maps out the tensions around who constitutes “community” within the York Vocational art programs.

When asked to describe the student community at YorkVoc, teachers described students, and the student body, in various ways. Neil Forcand, for example, refrained from making interpretive comments about the students, rather choosing to discuss students’ engagement with the arts, via future careers and academic paths. Here, all students were described as succeeding. As Mr. Forcand notes,

The students that uh, come to YorkVoc come here to uh, certainly uh, hope to leave and go off to a school … that deals with visual arts. Uh, it could be a place like OCAD, Ryerson, Sheridan, or even York [University] or uh, uh, Queens or University of Toronto in some cases. And, uh, they go off into professions from commercial art to teaching to uh, working as fine artists themselves, and they uh, come here in a hope to develop a portfolio which is strong enough and skills that are strong enough that will give them access to the school they want to go to.

Similarly, the principal Peter Lockley, relays a generic understanding of arts program students, expressing that students:

have a passion for art and they’re striving to get better. Um, you know, I think many of them are hoping to, to expand and be able to be- become successful. And you know, I think some of them are looking down the road, to perhaps going to media and media related uh, jobs as they move forward as well. You know, I think they, y’know, pretty committed to that program.

However, other teachers relayed more descriptive or interpretive impressions of the student body. Some teachers chose to discuss students alongside their ability, or engagement, speaking to shifts in demographics, and the process of student selection in the program. These descriptions usually referenced, either directly or indirectly, a division between two groups of students: those who were engaged – who were often seen as students commuting to school; and those who were not engaged – students who were often seen as students from the local area. Here, the implied reference seems to be the students who seek the program out, versus the students who fall into the program by default of geography. When describing students, teachers comments either echoed praise or disdain, oscillating between the successful, engaged student, or the unengaged and often
“destructive” student, or, as one teacher put it, the “elements we don’t want.” These comments reflect conceptions of success, as well as selection or exclusion processes; how to keep certain (successful) students in, and certain (unsuccessful) students out.

First, to succeed in the art programs at YorkVoc, a student must have skill and an “intellectual orientation.” As some of the teacher quoted in the previous section suggest, academic skills are integral to success. For example, in relaying his dreams for future YorkVoc art program initiatives, Neil Forcand speaks about an idea he imagines as changing future relations between the main building and the arts building. He describes a program in which it might be possible for York arts students to team up with students in the technical stream, taking shop classes, woodworking, and other similar courses. Mr. Forcand imagines that this teaming up will result in the opportunity for his arts students to work on designs destined to be turned into material things, and for the tech students to produce the objects of the art students’ designs. Here, his imagined art students are imbued with the ability to design and create concepts, the kind of intellectual work that is not assigned to the technical students within the main building.

This division between the intellectual art students and non-intellectual technical students emerges in other interviews, where teachers erect boundaries around who constitutes a successful art student. For example, in describing class projects such as “images of who we are,” Mr. Weller explains that whereas “kids that have had a lot of academic and reading understanding are really good at concepts,” those students that don’t have difficulty continuing with the work. Similarly, Mr. Langley notes:

> Our best visual arts students also happen to be our most intellectually oriented, and, you know, they’re good writers, it usually all goes together. You do, and we have, I have seen, and I have exceptional visuals that students with exceptional skills in art, but because they have no intellectual curiosity, no uh, no, no real life of the mind so to speak, uh, it doesn’t really take them very far.

Teachers feel that not all students are “intellectually oriented.” In fact, Mr. Langley suggests that “people are getting stupider, or people are getting more and more skill-less as we go along. It’s incredible, the difference.” Meanwhile, Mr. Weller perceives “the skill level of students descending slowly over the years … our kids aren’t that good on concept, whereas an academic kid is.” He attributes this downward shift to a result of time: “Again, because we don’t get as much time with them.” However, when Mr. Weller compares YorkVoc with another school he describes as being located in an “affluent, suburban neighborhood,” he notes their mandate for after-school involvement and minimum averages. He note that with the population of students at York “that’s not possible.”

Both teachers attribute what they perceive as students’ diminished output, as connected to the rise of “Special Ed” or “special needs” students in the classroom. According to one teacher, these students are often “dysfunctional kids.” Mr. Langley notes,

> One of the trends is more and more special ed kids. Uh, and uh, that’s been a trend in the department. We’ve always had that … its always been a part of us. But it seems to be increasing, making a larger portion, in our specialized program, which is for people who have a special interest in art and hopefully a special kind of a skill in it, or aptitude for it … that they want to be in art, they come here, which is a good thing. A lot of those people, a lot of those students the
special ed ones, some of them, uh, are not appropriate for the program ... my feeling is that they’re basically dysfunctional kids.

Mr. Langley accredits this “trend” to administration, or “the people in education” that “don’t really understand the arts” for “throw[ing]” students into art if they have difficulty with language skills. Mr. Weller also recognizes the larger number of “special needs” students in the program, which he attributes to the larger school’s demographic, of “high in special needs, and ESL.” He attributes students’ lack of “academic” skills to their socio-economic background: “When you typically see what they’re against, their socio-economic background is, and their, you know, they’re not a lot of them pushing for that [academics]. In, in the same thing you would get in, in an affluent suburban neighbourhood.” In tracing this logic, these teachers associate “special ed,” “special needs students,” and ESL students with “dysfunctional students,” who represent the local community, or the larger demographic of York Vocation, which is primarily immigrants and other minorities. While such connection may not be teachers’ intentions, the underlying assumptions about local students brush up against larger classed ideas about who constitutes a good art student, and hence, future artist. Despite the relatively clear articulation made by many teachers between language needs and the ability to succeed in school, the arts program’s director affirms that there are no arts teachers trained in ESL teaching.

The notion of “better students” as “involved” or “committed” emerges as the second attribute or characteristic of the successful student. This involvement is not tied to aptitude but rather, interest, engagement, and involvement. The students who are “more informed,” are “the ones that truly understand that they want art.” Avital Stavi explains that when she “started to work here, the students that we got were way, very, very ex – very motivated. And also somehow academically strong. Very strong.” She suggests that students’ involvement or commitment may have dwindled as a result of cutbacks. While, according to Ms. Stavi, implementing auditions for entry to the program has yielded an increase in committed students, issues around commitment and motivation continues to be an issue, as mentioned by the majority of teachers interviewed.

Teachers attribute involvement and motivation to various factors. Age is frequently referenced, as students are perceived to become more involved and committed as they mature. For example, according to Mr. Langley, grade 10 students “tend to be pretty lazy,” and not very “directed or thoughtful.” Or, as Mr. Weller explains,

Most of the problems will be in the early years: the 9s and 10s because they’re still not sure what they want to do, and they haven’t quite bought in, they’re still trying to feel their place within the whole school. Um, they either start to enjoy what’s here and buy in, or they say “nah, this is not me” and move on. By 11 and 12, it’s a phenomenal set of students.

And yet, Mr. Weller’s other comments suggest that he does not really believe all his students are phenomenal, or that the “problems” iron out after grade nine. In response to an observation about absenteeism in his class, he comments:

There’s a core, and when you came in, that’s the core. They will be here everyday. Those are the better students, more involved students, and then, the ones you saw dropping in late, or in second period, well those are the ones that aren’t going to make it for whatever reason. And
we’ve tried rescue strategies. ... You know many of them are quite capable. It’s attitude, and until they manage to decide that this is important to them, it’s not going to change.

Despite his observation about the differences between grade 9s and grade 12s, he feels that attendance does not necessarily correlate with grade lines. Rather, attendance and truancy are connected to classroom dynamic. He explains:

That’s why it would be nice to be able to identify that early and move those people [the ones who don’t show up] into a place that’s better suited for them, otherwise not here. And fill the space with people who are more interested in art, or even, have smaller classes. Because the class dynamic then is stronger, and it maintains the attendance better.

Although Mr. Weller says that “either [students] start to enjoy what’s here and buy in, or they say ‘nah, this is not me’ and move on,” teachers’ comments suggest that a student’s decision to simply “move on” may not be representative of the school climate. Rather, incoming ideas about the artist, and built-in selection processes attempt to secure the art building from the main building and its students. The distinction between “art students” and other students is also made clear by students, who see themselves as belonging to a very different community from the rest of the school.

Teachers also attribute involvement and motivation to socio-economic and familial factors. Teachers note, for example, that students who must work to maintain family finances, for example, do not have the time to commit extra hours to homework. However, sometimes links were more explicit. Mr. Weller notes that “their commitment level very much depends on their background.” He explains that when he talks about background, he means “their, their family background”:

You know, I see very talented kids here that, that sort of cruise and coast through, thinking that they got all the talent and they don’t need to do anything more. Uh, you know, and, when, the work ethic in the family that were a little different, they, they would change the attitude, or that the attitude would be different, and I look at my report card, - kid’s report card - and you know, we talk about how they get certain marks. I don’t think that’s happening a lot in you know, many of our kid’s sc-homes.

While this comment does not explicitly connect the uncommitted student to a particular socio-economic status, Mr. Weller’s later comments suggest that the comment, “many of our kid’s sc-homes” is filled with ideas around class and race. For example, the same teacher later connects student involvement to race or ethnicity, and neighbourhood, separating students who seek out the program, from students from the “local” community. He describes this local community as affected by immigration waves:

It fluctuates, but yeah, we have waves depending what the latest, latest immigrant wave is. I mean, we’ve got a huge population of Russian kids for a while, we’ve had, uh Tamil, there’s an Oriental population now. It depends what comes into this area, um, again, we’re a magnet school, so quite often, uh, we’re a mix of uh, there are some kids that are very interested in art, and will come to this school, and they’re typically the, the ones that know enough to research the system and make it here. And there’s a lot of local.

The students who are “very interested in art” live outside the local community, whereas the “local” students exist as a separate category, a separate student community. He continues, noting that some ethnic communities are more committed to the arts than others.
And again, by population, it depends on what art means to that population. Um, for instance, we had a lot of Philippino students because, uh, their parents were involved in art and art is part of their culture, whereas, uh, an Oriental population, typically they don’t see that as part of an education. They, they have other needs for their education, because they want their kids to get into high school, uh sorry, into university.

While Mr. Weller was the only teacher who was explicit in his views, he was not alone. The idea that “committed” – and thus, desirable – students commute is echoed by other teachers. Students from outside the area are perceived as more committed by virtue of the distance it takes for them to travel to school. Ms. Stavi tells us of “one great student that lives, oh, god knows, she takes three buses, I don’t know, gets up at five in the morning. But they are very committed, and yes, it does also take the students from the local area.” The principal also tells us of the great lengths students commute in order to bolster the impression of the school. This separation of the local students from those who commute is also referenced by students.

In order to keep “committed students” in, uncommitted students have to be pushed out. The views expressed above, about who constitutes a successful art student, likely influences teachers’ practice within the classroom. Indeed, during observations in classrooms, it is apparent that some teachers spent more time with what they perceived to be “committed” students. These students were also often White, and, like the commuting students with the knowledge to pursue a specialized program, were more likely to be middle or upper-middle class. When local students are denied assistance for whatever reason, they may ostensibly choose to leave, but are in effect being pushed out.

Absenteeism and truancy was an issue noted by all the teachers. However, because the successful and desired student is the student who “buys in” and is “involved,” there seemed to be very little that teachers did to prevent absenteeism. Yet, as Mr. Weller continues, “if, if you see that there’s a student to be rescued you do the paperwork, but,” he pauses to reflect, and adds “you know, it takes care of itself.” Hence, by not addressing absenteeism (a result of not “buying in,” and hence, not becoming involved in the community), teachers ensure that the students who stay are those who are always involved, always committed, and always commuting, thus pushing out local students who may not feel as welcomed in the first place.

Push-out mechanisms also functioned at an institutional level. Although weary of “running too fast to be specialized,” Ms. Stavi notes that recent portfolio requirements and interviews have ensured that incoming students have a “stronger sense of commitment.” This is in contrast to students who think the program is an “easy ride,” According to her, these students:

’don’t really want to be here, … so I hope that more and more with the interview sys – er, the interview system will – because, you know, if they don’t want to be here, it’s not good for them. It’s not good for me, and it’s definitely not good for the other students, because I find that te – students that are not fully committed to the program, they are the ones that are destructive and disengaged, and they affect the whole class.
Teachers also note that interviews and portfolios reduce the number of spots available for administration to “throw” students into art if they are having difficulty in the conventional program.

Thus, the prevalent mentality is one that suggests a preference for surveillance and maintenance of community boundaries. Keeping the art program “full,” a challenge also referred to by Mr. Forcand, means more than high numbers. And, according to Mr. Weller, it also means ridding the program of what teachers see as unwanted “elements”:

As much as it’s a choice to come here, the big school tends to be the place where people can move to. If we can keep it full, that doesn’t happen. But, when, when a kid gets bumped from another school, they still have to be schooled somewhere, and you’d like to be able to say you’re full, but quite often, because we’re a big school, there’s always room. And, you know, so quite often we’re forced to take elements that, that really you wouldn’t want at your school. Um, to bring them into the art, they need to have some ability, and so we’re spared that and that’s quite often why this retains its community.

Like the original comment above, which links “special ed” students with “dysfunctional kids” with minimal artistic ability, here, the students with “ability” are presumed to be well-behaved. In order to avoid an uncommitted student – “ones that aren’t going to make it” – it become necessary to have committed, successful students filling up the program. The same logic operates when teachers speak about York Vocational’s reputation, or overall school climate. YorkVoc is simultaneously worse than other schools (in affluent, suburban neighbourhoods) and better (“you know, we’re lucky”). These contradictions exist in order to resurrect boundaries, as teachers navigate what the art program is, and whom it serves in a time of transition.

Within this logic, the contradictions make sense. For example, as seen above, Mr. Weller frequently compares his challenges at York to more “affluent” or “suburban” neighbourhoods, stressing that “we don’t have the same demographic as a, you know, suburban school” where such challenges (e.g., academic rigour, motivation, etc.) are presumed to be non-existent. But later, when describing challenges he notes: “and I mean it seems like it’s bad here, but then you go to the suburban schools and surprisingly it’s the same story there, so you know, maybe it’s part of the system.” Students also used similar boundaries in speaking of their peers, marking out art students from the larger YorkVoc community in ways that map onto pre-existing racial and class hierarchies. While students were never explicit in their representations of a divided York community, their comments about York’s “accepting” environment often contrasted with underlying ideas about the “good kids,” or the students from the main building.

While students did not seem to be as affected by some of the transitional tensions vocalized by the teachers, they described the art program as physically and symbolically distinct from the main building. This included how students described the physical space, as well as the students. For example, each student interviewed implied, either directly or indirectly, that the arts environment was inclusive, or even “more accepting” than the main building. For instance, two grade 11 students explained that within the arts program everyone gets along, with one student noting that her classmates were her “buddies.” And yet, observations and interviews with other students suggested that this was not always the case. As students stressed the inclusiveness of the arts space, they resurrected
boundaries between people, suggesting fragmented social groupings, or boundaries between who belongs within the arts program and who does not. These references were often made in tandem with comments about students from the main building.

Students often contrasted the main building with the arts building, positioning the arts building as a positive space, and the main building, in contrast, as negative. For example, Kassia Wade describes the main building as having a lot of “scribbles and stuff in the stairwells.” She continues, “I can see where some people can get the idea that this school is full of mean people, maybe, because some of the writing on the walls is not very nice. Some of it is even racist, but most of the school is not really like that.” In contrast, she implies that within the arts building, “there’s a lot of acceptance here I find, and just this building, I would say, sort of have a different feel because it’s not as tagged up as the other building, and because it’s sort of nice to see people’s art everywhere, and yeah.”

The distinction between “tagging” and art speaks to the disparate sets of expectations against which both groups of students are measured. Similarly, the idea of the art building as “clean” was also voiced by Sonia Davidson, when she discussed student groups such as the “gangsters.” Sonia notes, “even when like, the gangsters come into our building, they seem to be more respectful because like, there’s artwork and stuff like that, I guess? So, they don’t like really throw garbage or do anything of that, so it seems to stay pretty clean.” In addition to alluding to art as a civilizing presence, Sonia affirms the division between the “clean” art building and its implied contrast, the main building. Because of student demographics, this statement is also deeply racialized and contributes to much of the boundary work that goes on between students.

Kassia and Sonia are not the only students who describe the divide between the art and main building by referring to their physical spaces. Candice Cheung says she prefers to “stay in the art building with my friends, eat, lunch, that’s all.” Candice explains her preferences for where to hang out. “This [the art] building is okay, I think, but like in [the] school building because they are scared, afraid that the bugs and rats will go around the class, that’s why, I understand that, so. But in art building its more comfortable to stay in, ‘cause when you go outside it’s too cold right now.” With continued probing, Candice notes that the students who are not in the art building remain in the main building during lunch, rather than go to the main building’s cafeteria. Daniel Yu, a non-arts student enrolled in an ESL-streamed art class explains that there was a lot of mystery surrounding the arts program. Even though he was taking a class within the building, he was unfamiliar with the arts program and the building it was housed in.

Throughout the interview process, students often spoke of the arts program, or YorkVoc as inclusive, and lacking cliques. And yet, in other moments, students were able to speak to the various groups within the school with ease. When speaking of the school climate as inclusive, students often made reference to the “different people here” and being “open-minded.” For example, Kassia notes how YorkVic as a whole makes her “more accepting” as a person. However, despite students’ insistence that YorkVoc and the art program lacks cliques, each student is readily able to name different groups.
When asked directly about cliques, Kassia notes “Yeah, I don’t find there’s much of a divide, but there is some, yeah.” Also, when describing the school space, she notes that she “hang[s] out everywhere pretty much.” Because different areas of the school are home to different groups, hanging out “everywhere” also means with “everyone.” While she speaks of YorkVoc as a whole, her description of different groups, spaces, and how groups move and shift as they change years, reveals a complex and vast web of social stratification.

Similarly, Chris also notes that “this school isn’t cliquey.” However, in expanding on this statement, he voices a contradiction. He refers to York as having “a lot more groups to choose from if you’re trying to find one.” Like Kassia’s thoughts, this response reveals that despite his insistence on inclusiveness, Chris can easily call up the school’s many groups. And, within this list, the art students are viewed as a separate category. “Yeah, there’s like, smokers, obviously, and then, potheads, gangsters, art people.” He clarifies what he means by “art people within the art program.” “There’s me and then there’s our grade 11 class, and then the grade 12s also. A couple of them hang around each other.” Chris suggests that students within the art program are a group in and of itself. However, he does not refer to all art students. Rather, only certain students are considered “art people.” This is echoed by Sonia, who describes her closest friends at York: “I hang out with like, art people, and like my friends from art classes.” She qualifies her statement: “Um, I know everybody in the class. I don’t hang out with everybody in the class. ... I hang out with the good kids from my grade eleven class, like, some of them.” These “good” kids, are the same kids that Mr. Weller describes earlier as “the core.” And, as his interview and Sonia’s words suggest, they are viewed as “good students,” apart from the local student community.

Underlying racial and class markers frame student conceptions of the YorkVoc art student community. These ideas often parallel teachers’ comments. When Chris Elliot lists groups of students who congregate within the school, he suggests that the “art people” are not “smokers,” “potheads,” or “gangsters.” This list parallels Sonia’s description of the school community: 

Um, well if you look at our school, it’s pretty uh, gangsta, there’s a lot of people, I dunno, so I just thought that, but that was mostly ‘cause of the main building, because of like who’s around the main building and stuff, so, like, the get, the gangster people like, hang out outside the main building and the artsies sort of people hang outside the art building, and like, I dunno, it sort of feels like two separate worlds. It’s like, there’s an art building which you’re like in all the time, or there’s like the main building which you’re actually like, in all the time.

Like Chris, Sonia implies that arts students (“artsies”) cannot be “gangster people,” and “gangster” people cannot be “artsies.” Her description also directly links Chris’ comments about social groups to the physical division between buildings. Sonia admits that there are students in her art classes that she would describe as being gangsters, yet she notes, “but they’re good at art.” Although Sonia struggles to define her terms, probing reveals her meaning to be raced and classed. Even when she notes that “gangster” students are enrolled in the art program, she sees them as an exception. She describes “gangster” as linked to “how you dress, how you act” or “how you like, portray yourself”; in contrast, “artsy kids” are “like, just regular people. ... Like, if you didn’t go to this school, I wouldn’t know you went to this school, like.” This suggests that Sonia sees the arts students as
exceptions to the school community, who are not regular, while being members of a larger community of people in the world who might be considered “regular” or normal.

Chris also references “gangsters” in his interview. He laughs as he describes his friends at the school, suggesting that perhaps they are simply “normal? I don’t know.” He proceeds to describe his friends, some of whom are in the art program:

Like, I don’t know at York it’s a bit different than my other school ‘cause like, they like, they come from, like, ‘cause [my other school] in the [affluent area of the city] was my first high school, and then like, everyone’s pretty much white and like, rich ... And um, hearing about like, their [York students’], lives it’s like, “woah that’s crazy” - I never would have ever thought that could happen. Like, talking about like robbing people and stuff, not like, friends, but like some friends, and um, yeah, it’s a lot different from the [affluent area] ‘cause it’s a lot of different experiences and like, a couple live at [a poor part of the city] – or I don’t know. They live at stations that are really rough and like sketchy to walk in.

Describing his friends further, he adds:

The biggest word that comes to mind is just like “gangsta” ‘cause of like how they dress, and then, you can, ‘cause gangstas usually like, they um, they act how they dress, so like, you buy a hoody and baggy jeans and Timberlands, shoes, if you’re gonna like, do drugs and like, rob people. Like you don’t see the people have like 90s and like, go to class everyday wearing huge baggy jeans.

Like the teachers who speak about student communities above, Sonia and Chris erect classed and raced boundaries between the students from the main building (the local community) and students from the arts building. As a way of understanding and gaining control over shifting staff and student demographics, students and teachers create boundaries to define which students “belong” within the ideal arts-school community and as artists in the world at the same time as teachers negotiate what it means to be an artist, or to teach art. That ideas circulated about what constitutes “good” art and successful art students map onto pre-existing class and racial hierarchies, as well as corresponding ideas about geographic location. Meanwhile, selected students within the arts program identify the student space as “accepting” and inclusive, even as they note demarcated boundaries between students, and between the art building and the main building.

As teachers and students code their language through these seemingly-apolitical social markers, they make visible the ways in which art and the artist are classed and raced, and, subsequently, how the arts space at York Vocational is also classed and raced. Within this logic, teachers view certain students as more worthy of the specialized arts training than others, as they hold firm to entrenched conceptions of what it means to teach art within a specialized arts program. At the same time, select students naturalize divisions between arts students and non-art students, preferring to see themselves as an exception to the larger YorkVoc community. Because this research was conducted during a time of change at York Vocational, regardless of the types of boundaries erected, students and teachers were particularly invested in boundary work. They felt the need to determine who counted and what counted as the arts as they tried to assert themselves as independent from the larger school community. In a school transitioning, what hopes might one have for their future role in training young artists?
Key Challenges and Future Implications

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, Chandni Desai, & Lia Gladstone

On November 9th, 2009, the principals of two of the secondary schools involved in this research, Margaret Kerr and Barrie Sketchly, joined two members of the research team, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (Principal Investigator) and Lydia Menna (Graduate Research Assistant), along with a representative from the Toronto District School Board, Christine Jackson (Program Coordinator for the Arts), and special guest Linda Nathan (Co-Headmaster, Boston Arts Academy) to discuss the lessons learned from this research and present implications for future research, policy, and practice. The rich discussion that ensued through the panelists’ presentations and through questions from the audience provided important feedback and was a source of ideas for implications emerging from this work. In this section we present a set of implications for future research as well as areas for consideration with regards to policy and practice in urban arts high schools. These implications are based on analyses from the data, themes articulated in this report and discussions from panelists.

This section is organized along the four dimensions explored in the reports: Community, Journey, Learning and Teaching, and Administration, which were drawn from previous work on arts education organizations, such as community arts centre (Davis, 1993), and previous research on arts high schools (Davis, 2001).

Community

The notion of community is a central aspect of how schools deeply influence the life of students and teachers. In urban arts high schools, the idea that schools are welcoming, supportive, and accepting communities is widespread. It echoes throughout this report and is present in previous research on this topic (Davis, 2001, 2005). For example, in describing their time at Cherryhill or in recalling their initial impressions of the school, students often relay memories of a “welcoming,” “accepting,” “caring” community that just “feels like home.” (see p. 8) Similarly, at Dannerville most staff and students describe the school to be a positive, diverse and safe environment. As one staff member explains, “Students of all, you know, from all different social backgrounds, all different socioeconomic backgrounds, you know, a lot of different students feel very welcome here” (see p. 44).
The question of whether and in what ways specialized arts programs generate a sense of community that is welcoming and supportive of students is a key topic for future research with broad implications for policy and practice. Within the context of arts high schools, the notion that the arts are the key ingredient in the evolution of a supportive and welcoming community is widespread, yet largely taken for granted and unexplored. Whether this is a unique characteristic of specialized arts programs or not, it is clear that it is an important aspect of how constituents experience these communities. It is therefore crucial to explore, for instance, the role that students and teachers play in building community and shaping school culture.

Furthermore, the role that particular rituals and traditions have in establishing a sense of family and community within these schools and the role that the arts play in such rituals and traditions would be an important area of research (Jackson, 1968; McLaren, 1993). For example, what does the ringing of a bell by the Principal, or hats worn by the jazz band, or white shirts worn by the choir say about the rituals and traditions of a particular school and how these contribute to the sense of community (see p. 14)? How do these aspects of school life shape the way in which students feel that they are part of something bigger than just themselves, while at the same time being welcomed as they are?

While clearly an important theme, why and in what ways the arts play a role in how ideas about community develop within urban arts high schools remains an important topic for further investigation. We have identified two key areas for further research: (1) how is the notion of a safe and supportive community mobilized and constructed within the context of different arts high schools? And (2) how do particular ideas about the arts and stereotypes about the artist either challenge or reproduce broader dynamics of social inequality and cultural diversity that shape how students experience a sense of community?

Safe and supportive communities

The portraits in this report suggest that student safety was a key aspect of how students experienced these contexts, which they described as tolerant and accepting school communities. Yet, it was also clear that what it means to feel “safe” and be “tolerant” also varies across schools and between students. For example, at Cherryhill students describe a community that protects its members, as is evident in the story about the student body coming together to prevent the theft of the Principal’s possessions. At Dannerville, many students and staff describe the school as a “welcoming space where diversity is celebrated and individuals are encouraged to be themselves.” Words like “friendly,” “laid back,” “open,” “accepting,” and “safe” come frequently in conversations about what sets this community apart from other high schools.” Student Nick Cole describes the school as “an extremely friendly environment,” and states that, as a Black student, he appreciates that “there’s not too much, like, segregation, there’s not too much racial stuff.” Similarly student Kris Montero says that at Dannerville he is able to be himself, “Because it’s such an accepting school ... I was just finding out that I’m gay, and it was just better, because if I were to go to [my home school], I know I’d get picked on and stuff” (see pp. 44-45).

However, not all students felt that Dannerville was inclusive. Grade 11 student Fran Hoffman describes how her circle of friends is often described by other students as the
“basement kids,” who are considered scary. Although most students insist that there are no cliques or hierarchies at Dannerville, the basement kids are often described in terms that challenge this picture of an inclusive community. “Unless you’re a basement kid, you usually stick above ground,” states one grade 11 student, who insists that many students avoid the area of the school where Fran and her friends hangout. “It’s a place you don’t want to go. I mean it’s scary, it’s dark and it’s loud!” (p. 45).

Since notions of safety are usually grounded in personal narratives and are both relational and personal, how ideas about safety and tolerance are experienced in these contexts likely varies widely. In addition, because notions of safety are associated with the particular features of schools and communities, it is crucial to better understand how local features influence the way in which students may or may not feel safe. Yet, it is clear from the research that the themes of safety and tolerance are widespread across urban arts high schools and that there are also many similarities in how these themes are articulated. Further research of the specific ways in which safety and tolerance are defined in particular school contexts becomes imperative to understanding safety and important for establishing strategies and policies to make schools safer.

**Equity and diversity**

While safety, a sense of support, and tolerance for difference are central themes across all of the participating programs, questions of equity and diversity in arts high schools also remain a critical area for further examination. It is essential to continue asking questions about what it means for arts high schools to be equitable and diverse, what such schools and programs could look like, and what policies and practices would foster such goals. Indeed, precisely because the arts continue to be associated with notions of elitism and exclusion, it is crucial for arts educators to remain vigilant for the ways in which dynamics of exclusion persist. An illustration of how the arts operate in exclusionary ways is the fact that only students admitted to the Rick Monette arts program at Sherwood are able to participate fully in the courses offered, while other students are only allowed to take open electives. As a result, inequalities persist between the Collegiate (non-arts) and Monette (arts) students at Sherwood in terms of the courses they are able to take. More specifically, one teacher notes how “these Rick Monette kids do their arts, but then they also do English together and they believe it’s taught like an enriched English … so ESL students cannot be in Rick Monette, kids who are [at the] applied level cannot be in Rick Monette, so it creates this elitist [attitude]” (p. 59).

Examining elitism would provide insights into how exclusion and broader dynamics of marginalization operate within arts high schools and would allow further understanding of the ways in which hierarchies are constituted within an arts high school community. For instance, it is essential to examine whether all members of a school community are represented equally through the arts or if certain groups are ignored as a result of particular ideas about the arts. It is also crucial to continue exploring whether and how arts high schools serve and mirror the communities in which they are located. In addition, if hierarchies exist within and between students involved in the arts, examining these
dynamics would illuminate the role of the arts in either reproducing or challenging inequality.

Another area of study related to equity and diversity is the extent to which stereotypes and myths about the arts and artists operate within these programs and the role that such stereotypes might play (intentionally or unintentionally) in how communities are structured in these settings. At York Vocational High School, students within the art community suggest that art students, or “artsies,” cannot be “gangsta” people, and “gangsta” people cannot be “artsies.” An art student at YorkVoc says that “art people” are not “smokers,” “potheads,” or “gangstas.” Similarly, another art student at York Vocational says “Um, well if you look at our school, it’s pretty uh, gangsta, there’s a lot of people, I don’t know, so I just thought that, but that was mostly ‘cause of the main building, because of like who’s around the main building and stuff, so […] Like, the, get, the gangster people like, hang out outside the main building, and the artsies sort of people hang outside the art building, and like, I don’t know, it sort of feels like two separate worlds” (p. 88).

Conducting future research on elitism, hierarchies between students, and possible stereotypes and myths that are constructed about particular social groups could assist schools (administrative staff, teachers, and students) as well as school boards in establishing strategies for addressing issues of inequality. Moreover, examining issues of diversity with regards to program and school demographics by focusing on race, class, ability, gender, and sexual orientation is another critical area for further research. This research would not only assist in building knowledge on how to create equitable and diverse schools but it could help address student(s) concerns regarding their place outside the school, in the larger picture of the city as well as society.

Summary

In summary, further research focusing on how communities are built and how constituents define community is much needed. In particular, exploring how arts high schools generate a sense of safety within a supportive and tolerant community and the range of ways in which this is defined and experienced is crucial. Furthermore, how the dynamics of social inequity and cultural exclusion intersect with notions of elitism, particular views of the arts, and ideas about what it means to be an artist are crucial for understanding community. A more thorough understanding of the kinds of communities that evolve in the context of urban arts high schools is an important area for future research.

Journey

The many historical paths that specialized arts programs have followed, which influences the way they currently operate, is largely understudied. Future research focusing on the individual histories of teachers and students that come to be part of these high schools would also be an important area of research. In particular, there is a great deal of interest – and no research to date – on the various paths that students take after graduating from specialized arts program. Following the journey of alumni from a wide range of arts high schools would allow for a better understanding of the role that these programs might play in student futures.
Program histories

With regards to the histories of the programs, with the exception of a few histories of individual programs (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2001; Gore, 2007), there is no historical account of the evolution of specialized arts programs in North America. Based on the available research, it could be argued that specialized arts high schools are a uniquely North American phenomenon (Curtis, 1987; Wilson, 2001). Yet further research into their evolution and the various ways in which programs have emerged is much needed. Arts High Schools have existed since the 1930s and went through a process of expansion in the 1980s in both Canada and the US. Since 2001, there has been a second wave of expansion, particularly in urban centres like New York City. Furthermore, the emergence of specialized arts programs in both countries has followed different social and historical shifts. The historical and social circumstances that have contributed to the expansion of public arts high schools have not been properly studied and further research would add an important dimension to our understanding of these institutions.

The journeys of students and teachers

Likewise, there is very little research into the paths that have lead students and teachers into these specialized arts programs. Given what we know about the unequal access of specialized programs in general, it would be worth exploring how students find their way and negotiate the process of entry into arts programs in public schools. The Principal at Cherryhill states, “the school’s philosophy is inclusive, as admission to the arts high school is not contingent on prior experience, often acquired through costly private lessons and extra-curricular training” (p. 14). Yet, it would be interesting to examine how having access to extra-curricular activities, and other past experiences, can potentially assist students in entering arts programs. Such research would help us understand whether these opportunities are in fact available to different members of the communities that support (and fund) these public programs.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to look at and trace where some of the graduates from the urban arts high schools have gone, learn what they are doing after graduation, and investigate the role that a specialized arts program has for different students’ trajectories. Given the challenges of establishing measurements of student success in the arts (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Winner & Cooper, 2000), understanding the academic experiences of program graduates might shed new light into the role of the arts in the processes of academic achievement. It would also be interesting to look at what non-admitted students that auditioned or created a portfolio are doing and the paths they embark upon. Whether students who are not admitted into these programs continue to be engaged in the arts and what role the arts may play in their educational experiences would also shed light into our understanding of the arts in education. This research may provide insights on program structuring and new visions for inclusive, diverse, and equitable arts programming.

Our exploratory research suggests that teachers in arts high schools do not necessarily follow the same paths into and through their careers as traditional schools, as have been documented elsewhere in the literature (Menna, 2009). “I was a dancer in my
life,” explains a dance teacher at Cherryhill, “I kept getting drawn into teaching somehow, I kept getting drawn into it.” This teacher describes how despite her reluctance to pursue a career into teaching within the public schools system, she was slowly drawn by the evolving program, until she assumed more and more leadership. How teachers arrive at these programs, how they develop as teachers, and what direction their careers as teachers take within these contexts would add a new dimension to how teacher development is understood both in general and in arts contexts in particular.

Summary

Documenting the institutional histories and the personal journeys of those involved in arts high schools is an important area of future research. The social and historical conditions that have lead to the expansion of specialized arts high schools and the particular forms they have taken in Canada and the US is of great interest and would inform continued debates about these particular programs. This would also inform policy debates about the future of these programs in public schools. The paths that students and teachers have taken to arrive at these programs are also important, and these are typically quite different from the traditional paths both students and teachers take into schools. Documenting the journey of alumni would be an important way to learn more about the role of the arts in how students pursue their careers. Learning more about teachers’ journeys would inform how we understand teacher development both within and beyond the arts.

Teaching and Learning

Many of the themes identified in this research and noted by the panelists as important are related to the areas of teaching and learning. More specifically, different notions of student engagement and success are prevalent in the data. The panelists spoke at length about the need to rethink notions of student engagement and success in order to capture the particular experiences of students in each school context. A Principal at one of the participating schools sees his program as able to provide students with diverse pathways to achieving success in their lives, both in terms of their future careers as well as personally (see pp. 28-32). This sentiment is also echoed by a teacher at the same school who describes the arts as “where you can grow as a person” (p. 30).

In addition, the challenges and the differences between teaching and learning in the arts and non-arts programs are highlighted in the data and noted by the panelists as being significant for the future well being and productivity of students and teachers in specialized arts programs. In summary, how both teaching and learning are conceptualized in the contexts of specialized arts programs is crucial for drawing implications for policy and practice.

Student engagement and success

Documenting and “measuring” student engagement and success in the arts has been one of the perennial challenges for arts educators (Burton et al., 2000; Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Winner & Cooper, 2000). Urban Arts High Schools provide opportunities for exploring whether and in what ways the arts play a role in student engagement and school
success. Throughout the data, there is ample evidence for high levels of engagement, and students and teachers spoke about the significant differences in how they engage learning in the context of specialized arts programs. One key question noted by panelists had to do with the ways in which some of these practices might be transferrable to other contexts and what we might learn about student engagement through further research.

For example, the panelists observed that the concept of “apprenticeship” as a form of engagement needs to be understood not as a relational interaction between individual teachers and students, but as groups of students and teachers learning in complex, interdisciplinary ways. A student at Martelli describes how the close and collaborative relationship she has with her arts teachers has nurtured her leadership skills. While “not exactly equal,” she has a sense that they are working “on the same level, because they both use each other’s strengths” (p. 33). Conducting future research on the notion of apprenticeship could lead to developing more effective teaching and learning practices according to the panelists.

The panelists also recommended that further research on the different ways in which students benefit from engagement in these programs needs to move beyond “highly individualized notions of self esteem.” This would also require a conceptual unpacking of stereotypical notions of what it means to be an artist, particularly the myth of a lone genius (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2008). They suggested the need for broadening the scope of inquiry to include the entire school and to explore the ways in which the school as a community generates a wide range of ways on engaging in learning in and through the arts that are not always centered on individuals. Different ways of conceptualizing student engagement would have implications for how student “success” is documented.

One key aspect of the different kinds of student engagement that take place in the context of specialized arts programs is related to the challenges of innovation and integration in teaching. Indeed, a better understanding of teaching in specialized arts programs would shed light into the significance of different modes of learning and how to engage them effectively through pedagogy.

Teaching innovation, and integration

One of the principals who participated in the panel described how his school encourages teachers to innovate:

We try to create a space for our teachers to be free, and we try to create guidelines for the teachers to do what they want, and to take it where it goes, for kids to be able to try one art or another, or combine them and move back and forth.

Such openness to and encouragement of innovation was present in some of the schools involved in this study.

It is important to develop a better understanding of how teaching strategies are informed by arts practices and how these come to be defined and understood by teachers and students in each school context. The range of curriculum and pedagogical practices present in the schools raise various questions, particularly as they are related to and manifest through conceptions of “the artist” and what it means to engage in “the arts.” The
Lastly, the different approaches to teaching in specialized arts programs also point to conceptions of what it means to be a good student, and therefore in how student engagement (or lack thereof) is defined. Therefore, it is crucial to interrogate what it means to be an engaged student and what this looks and feels like from both students’ and teachers’ perspectives. How can we learn from specialized arts programs about bringing student engagement to the centre and have teachers working towards this goal?

The panelists pointed to the positive aspects of what is often termed “arts-based” learning and the importance of considering the arts as “an entry point for life” as opposed to notions of the arts for arts’ sake. Yet, they also raised particular challenges that resonate with the research in this report. For instance, the benefits and challenges of having the arts as central to the entire school program as opposed to an arts program within a school provides an opportunity for exploring different ways in which students engage “arts-based” learning in different programs. Panelists commented on pressures that students must face to balance their areas of specialization in the arts with the demands of their academic courses. The notion of a “well rounded person” was present across the schools, but what this meant and how a given school sought to accomplish this varied from school to school. Faculty members at Cherryhill caringly respond to students’ perceived struggles to balance their arts and non arts commitments. Stella Warner, a teacher at the school, knows the experience of an arts high school student first hand. With striking precision she voices empathy for students striving to accomplish the balancing act. Another teacher at Cherryhill states “it’s hard to get kids to understand the balance, especially when a lot of pressures are being put on them with the grades, with their arts” (see p. 16).

Lastly, exploring ways to integrate teaching and learning in the arts both across the arts and between arts and academics was highlighted as one of the key areas for future research. While the importance of such strategies vary from school to school, this in one of the areas in which specialized arts high schools can contribute to the practices of educators in other non-specialized schools.

The panelists also commented on the utility of reports such as this one as a potential outlet for sharing strategies across programs, and for teachers and administrators to offer advice and suggestions to other colleagues. How these kinds of documents can be used to generate a broad dialogue across schools that might have the effect of benefitting the teaching and learning happening across a given district is an important area for future exploration and research.

Summary

Teaching and learning are central to the life of a school, regardless of its focus. In specialized arts programs, teaching and learning raise particular questions that are worthy of further research. What student engagement looks like and what it involves in a context defined by the arts might offer a different perspective and encourage the expansion of views about engagements in other schools. These expanded conceptions of engagement would have implications for how student success is documented. Given the narrow focus on academic achievement that defines student success in mainstream schools, an expanded definition of success might be a key contribution of research in specialized arts programs. Lastly, the different approaches to teaching in specialized arts programs also point to
important implications for practice. In particular, notions of innovation in the arts and attempts to integrate teaching both within the arts and across the arts and academics might inform expanded definitions and provide opportunities for innovation across teaching contexts.

Administration

There are many aspects of administering programs such as the ones documented in this report that are worthy of further research and that could have important implications for policy and program implementation. The challenges faced by administrators are many and encompass both the typical challenges of running a school as well as the particular challenges of running resource intensive and time consuming programs such as specialized arts programs. For example, the administrative aspect of integrating such a complex arts program as Rick Monette is described as presenting challenges that affect every aspect and constituent of the school. Despite these challenges, however, administrators speak about the fruitful influence of the students of the Rick Monette program and how well they interact with the rest of the school (pp. 59-60). At Cheryhill, Principal Coleman points to the costs and risks associated with transforming the school’s culture. He describes how the initial intake of students that came for the arts package went down, and further asserts that “it was a great risk we had to take to begin to get a clear group, who were here for the arts” (p. 19).

The panelists highlighted three key challenges that are evident in this report: (1) the challenge of balancing the needs and demands of competing interests within a schools, particularly in schools in which specialized arts programs are only one part of a larger school program, (2) the challenge of funding and allocating resources for a successful arts program, and (3) the challenge of documenting program success.

Balancing competing demands

The ways in which specialized arts programs are implemented vary from school to school. The most important difference is between schools where the arts program is only one part of the whole school, and those where the arts program is part of the entire school. Four of the five programs documented in this report are in schools that also offer other programs, and only one can be considered a full school program. Our research suggests that both of these models are widespread in Canada and the US.

There are critical differences both in terms of benefits and challenges of having an arts school versus an arts program within a whole school, and this is one important area of research that would have wide policy implications. For instance, schools that are fully involved in the arts program share a sense of purpose around the arts and are able to focus program resources. Schools where specialized arts programs are only one among many struggle much more to determine how resources are allocated and there is a more explicit sense of competition between programs. At Sherwood, competition between arts and non-arts programs creates inequalities between the Monette students (the arts students) and the Collegiates’ (the non-arts students), with the Monette students having a sense of
entitlement to the resources available to them (see p. 70). This presents different challenges for administrators.

While there are critical differences between these two types of school, there are also many similarities. One key challenge is allocating resources for the different aspects of the program, particularly between the artistic and academic aspects. This is true for all schools, regardless of whether they are a whole school or exist within school programs.

For example, at Dannerville, the challenge of allocating resources between arts and academics creates frustrations across programs. A teacher at Dannerville discusses the ongoing tensions that have resulted at her school due to funding disparities. She says, “it’s an issue at this school because for a long time we were trying to get designation as an arts school. ... with the name was supposed to come extra funding.” In the three years since gaining formal recognition as an arts school, nothing has changed for academic programs. “My budget hasn’t gone up in ten years, which is ridiculous,” she exclaims (see p. 52). In addition to cultivating frustrations among academic teachers who feel slighted by what they see as a prolonged pattern of unfairness within the school, she suggests that these funding disparities mean that Dannerville can barely provide students with the minimal resources needed to support their learning.

Exploring different approaches for addressing the challenge of allocating limited resources to the competing demands of programs is a crucial area for future research. At the heart of the challenge of allocating resources is that public arts high schools struggle for resources in general. This is documented in this report and deserves further attention.

**Funding and resource allocation**

Panel participants widely agreed that financial support is a critical force in determining how and in what ways arts programs and schools both deteriorate and thrive. Panelists and research participants all noted the enormous financial demand involved in implementing a specialized arts program. For Mr. Bell, a teacher in the Monette program at Sherwood, the future of the program may depend on its ability to establish close links with the business community, something he says other similar schools have done effectively (see p. 71). Additionally, parents have a great deal of influence on the range of resources and opportunities available to Sherwood students, pointing to the way in which community members surrounding the school (specifically parents) can influence resources available to students in the arts and non-arts programs (see p. 70) The challenge of identifying and securing financial support is central to the problem of sustainability for these programs. Administrators point out that arts funding cuts from the provincial government have made it difficult to create and support arts programs. The challenge of, as one administrator at Dannerville put it, “doing this on a shoe-string budget” has led to the need of approaching alternative funding sources. Yet this has proved to be difficult in the midst of a post-recession climate. One key difference between different schools is related to the constituents they serve. While some schools draw students from families with social, economic, and cultural resources that allow them to effectively raise additional funds, others do not have access to such resources, creating gross inequalities between programs.
Further research into the strategies that different programs use to raise necessary funds, and policies that might even the playing field in terms of access to resources, are important areas of inquiry. Panelists also noted that the larger challenges faced by school districts are also faced within the context of arts programs. For example, the problem of declining enrollment was also highlighted as an issue worthy of consideration in terms of sustaining an influx of creative young people to keep such programs “alive.” At the same time, this raises questions about what students are the ones that schools want to attract and, as documented above, it raises questions about the relationship between the schools and their surrounding communities.

**Documenting program success**

Panelists pointed out that one of the key challenges for securing funding and the sustainability of the program is documenting program success. Traditional modes of assessment and documenting success are usually framed in terms of narrow definitions and markers of academic achievement, which are difficult to link to productive and rich experiences in the arts. This presents a challenge to arts programs and schools, since they may not get the funding they deserve because they cannot represent their successes in terms of test scores. Due to a focus on outcomes that can be quantified, administrators are forced to respond to Districts and Ministries in ways that are, as one administrator put it, “all about check lists” that can not actually reflect what makes these effective schools. One administrator bluntly states, “if you can’t count it, then it’s not happening, then it is not a concern.” Developing different ways to document what actually happens in specialized arts programs in order to secure resources and ensure sustainability is of great importance.

Reports such as this one and the case studies contained herein may also provide a different perspective for policy makers interested in learning about what actually happens in these programs. Indeed, panelists underscored that portraits such as the ones included in this report could provide a unique and useful perspective. The panelists noted that the energy echoed in their schools about “creativity and life” cannot be represented through the means in place to document success in schools. As an alternative, the administrators suggested that using portraits to document what is happening within arts programs and as a way to generate ideas and conversations would be more effective. This strategy has been used effectively in other schools, and is an area of great promise for future research with critical policy implications. Whether and how the methodology of portraiture can be used as a tool for relationship building between various constituents, whether within schools or beyond school walls, remains an unexplored question. Perhaps school portraits can serve as a starting point for important conversations between students, teachers, administrators, school boards, community members, funders, and researchers about the importance and the future of specialized arts programs.

**Summary**

The challenges of running specialized arts programs are critical, and largely gravitate around the problem of funding and resources. These problems, as one administrator put it, are “not going away anytime soon.” The challenge of allocating
resources to competing demands varies from school to school depending on structures and availability. The challenge of documenting program success for an audience that is narrowly focused on numbers and quantification of academic achievement is ever-present. Ultimately, as the panelists and many participants in this research expressed, how the arts are or are not valued in society at large greatly influences how funding and resources are allocated for specialized arts programs. This may be part of the reason why there are such dramatic disparities between the resources available for different schools and what kinds of arts programs are available for different students based on social and cultural categories. Indeed, what is evident in this research is that not all arts programs are created – or funded – equally and that disparities also reflect broader social disparities. This shifts the question from whether the arts are valued by society, to who the arts are valuable for, and in what ways the value of the arts is attached to dynamics of social exclusion. This remains a critical question for future research, policy, and practice.

**Summary of Implications for Future Research**

This report and the discussions that have evolved around the findings from this work have generated valuable ideas for further research. In this section we have discussed these ideas around the areas of: school community; the journeys of students, teachers, as well as the schools; teaching and learning; and administration.

Further research on the ways in which communities come together and how arts high schools generate a sense of safety and tolerance are critical areas that need to be further explored. Further, in order to understand community, notions of elitism and dynamics of social inequality and cultural exclusion related to ideas about the arts are identified as important aspects of how communities have evolved within urban arts high schools.

Documenting the personal and institutional histories or “journeys” that shape how urban arts high schools are evolved would inform policy debates about the future of arts programs in public high schools in both Canada and the US. One key unexplored area are the journey of alumni, which could provide insight on the role of the arts and how students pursue their careers.

Questions about teaching and learning are key to understanding what student engagement looks like and it’s relationship to student success in the context of arts high schools. Different approaches to teaching in specialized arts programs can provide insight and suggestions for practice not only in specialized programs, but in regular arts programs as well. Research in this area is particularly important because views on innovation in the arts and efforts to integrate teaching within the arts and academic disciplines may provide opportunities for innovation across disciplines.

The challenges associated with running arts programs is a final and crucial area of concern for administrators. How different programs are structured and administered and understanding the particular challenges that emerge within these structures could have implications for future programs and policy beyond specialized arts programs. Two key issues that panelists identified and that is evident in the data are related to acquiring and allocating resources. Public arts high schools have the burden of having to do a lot with a
little, and resource disparities between and within schools highlight issues about inequality.

The Urban Arts High School Project is now entering its third phase, which will involve in depth research at six public arts high schools, three in Canada, and three in the United States. Some of the questions outlined in this report, particularly around questions of community, will be explored in this research. The exploratory research reported in this report, however, should serve for many other researchers to develop research projects. Our hope is that this report will ignite a lively research agenda around public arts high schools. This work is sorely needed, and this report provides several starting points for future researchers to take up and contribute to our knowledge and understanding of these important programs. Not only is this research potentially beneficial to those in academia, but also, as UAHS Graduate Research Assistant Lydia Menna aptly points out:

this methodology [or the use of portraiture] provides a space for researchers and schools to come together in an accessible way to explore what is happening in schools—the good, the bad, the complex—and it does provide a space to really engage the voice of students, teachers and various participants.

We hope the implications drawn from this study become a useful site for future research, and speak to the needs of a variety of groups and individuals both within and outside the academic realm.
## References


