IT ALL BEGAN WITH PENNY MILTON’S PHONE CALL LAST DECEMBER. THE Canadian Education Association was organizing a symposium for educational leaders in Vancouver in May, with the theme “Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners”, to investigate schooling from the perspective of learning. Penny wanted to involve high school students from three cities, Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver, in an endeavor that would spark constructive conversations about the purpose and form of schooling for adolescent learners. She knew the power of drama and was calling to ask: Could I help?

I was in the midst of setting up a program at York University called “Destination Arts”, a joint venture of the Faculties of Education and Fine Arts, to foster partnerships among artists, arts organizations, faculty, teacher candidates, graduate students, teachers, school administrators and community members. I saw this venture as a perfect complement to that program.

Our telephone conversation lasted a long time as we discussed how to bring students together, build trust and engagement, find ways to weave their individual stories into a dramatic anthology about adolescents and learning, and record the process from beginning to the final performance.

Over the following weeks, as the plan took shape, York University joined the partnership with the CEA and the three school boards. We enlisted the aid of my husband, Chuck Lundy, an award-winning education film-director, to create two DVD’s, one of the process and one of the performance, itself, from videotapes produced by the participating students.

And so, with a growing sense of excitement, we began….

The directors/superintendents of education in the three boards chose the participating schools: Templeton High School in Vancouver, Bloor Collegiate in Toronto, and Prince Andrew High School in Halifax. All of the students – nine from each school (eight actors and one videographer) – were in drama, and most were in Grade 12. I had specifically asked that they be selected to represent the populations of the three cities, and so they were a racially, ethnically, economically and academically diverse group. Because I was interested in hearing voices that are often invisible, I did not want only those students who were performing well academically.

The first meeting with the teachers from the three cities, Rob Wigle from Halifax, Bleema Getz from Toronto and Tanya Zambrano from Vancouver, took place at Destination Arts, York University, and was key to establishing a cooperative working relationship. We spent one full day sharing information about the students and planning the project along with representatives from CEA, York University, and our video director. We wanted students to imagine new realities and answer this question: “What could high schools look like if we got it right?” To help them formulate an answer, I proposed that we situate the drama work around the theme “articulation of voice”.

It was March when we first began working with the students. Because we did not have much time, I knew I had to find effective ways to gain insight into the details of their lives in secondary schools and probe deep enough inside that human experience to find the voices we needed to hear. The first, most important job when the group met was to establish trust, collaboration and respect. I divided students from the three schools into small groups. I first wanted to discover how they defined their identity in relationship to their school environments and neighborhoods. In an exercise called “We are from…”, students wrote their personal stories of identity, family, schooling, etc. They then found a way to “get these stories up on their feet” and shared them with the larger group. Using these drama exercises, the three groups began to form a community of learners, willing to engage in the difficult work of revealing
intrigued by the possibility that the re-enactment of their stories might trigger a big enough response with a national audience to make change possible.

After the rehearsals at York, the students from Bloor CI confided to their drama teacher that they had never felt so important. Being treated like professionals – having lunch and coffee breaks, being thanked for their work by adults who valued their contribution – affected them and began to change the way they thought of themselves and their school. When the invitation to participate first came from CEA, the reaction from one of the Bloor students was, “Why would they choose a ghetto school like this one?” Later, as the project progressed, the school staff began noticing that the students were acting differently – walking taller, being more generous with others, smiling regularly and showing more interest in schoolwork.

After the two-day rehearsal at York University, the drama teachers and students returned home, where they continued developing the play, using the personal stories that had been generated as well as source material I had given them. When I visited the three schools in April, we continued to explore ways to provoke conversations and to represent material dramatically. We rehearsed Readers Theatre pieces, developed choreography, prepared improvisations, wrote two-voice poems and a rap, and created personal monologues. The Halifax students co-composed a song with professional songwriter, Steve Dooks. The Toronto students came up with an “Imagine a School” poem, triggered by a keynote speech by a Toronto student at a conference of educators. The Vancouver students wrote their true feelings about what was happening in school.

Students were then asked to tell the story of a critical moment in their school experience – perhaps a time when they had made a mistake and thought differently about themselves afterwards, or a relationship that had gone awry. They told these stories in small groups and then began to work them through improvisation. Because they shared the common language of drama, they worked together well. Some of their stories were heartbreaking; others were inspirational; all showed courage. Alice Pitt, the Associate Dean of Education at York, watched part of the rehearsal on the second day and spoke to the students afterwards about the importance of investigating “difficult knowledge”. Belarie Zatzman, Associate Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, recognized in one of the scenes the importance of witnessing an event (in this particular case it was a racist encounter) and speaking out about it.

I had invited my fourth year theatre and pre-service education students to participate so that they could witness the teaching and learning that occurs through drama. They were amazed by the enthusiasm and creativity of the students, and they saw the activities presented in their university courses come to life with the high school students. Any doubts that they had about creative drama teaching immediately flew out the window as they witnessed its impact on the students.

As we worked in this university setting – listening to voices of academics, engaging in conversations with representative from CEA, being supported by student teachers and theatre students – the high school students became intrigued by the possibility that the re-enactment of their stories might trigger a big enough response with a national audience to make change possible.

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monologues to poetically tell individual stories of personal struggles in school. The drama teachers spent rehearsal time with the students both before and after my visits, and we were in regular contact.

The work was difficult, but I never doubted that it would come together beautifully. The effort had a karma of its own – and people were generous in ways that surprised me. I was touched by the fact that in each of the cities, the directors, superintendents and principals came not only to watch rehearsals, but also to talk with the students, listen to them, and ask questions that validated their experiences. And the students were thrilled that their work was given such attention – “pretty amazing”, as one student put it, that not only the principal but the director and the superintendents dropped by to see the rehearsal.

Just two months after our first gathering, the company of actors and teachers re-convened in Vancouver on the Friday before the Monday evening performance. I was in the lobby when the Toronto and Halifax students checked into the Delta Vancouver Suites. The re-encounter of the students from Toronto and Halifax was magical. After the hugs and the laughter, Leroy, a Toronto student, said, “Miss, that whole experience was beautiful – and I mean with two L’s!” Many of these kids had never stayed in a hotel before, and I was delighted by the hotel staff. Cookies and a professional respect were all part of the welcome.

On Saturday, the rehearsals began. Jet lag had hit – (the Halifax students’ grad dance had been the night before!) – but everyone was “pumped”. We knew our job was to encourage dialogue so that the Canadian school experience could be made better for adolescents. We knew that we had very little time to find an artistic way of weaving the various threads of conversation and storytelling together. We knew we wanted the audience to attend to the details – to listen to the stories and to be influenced by them. We knew that we had to iron out how to say what we needed to say, not only provocatively but also respectfully. And most of all, we knew we had to tell the truth.

From the beginning, the students were focused. They took few breaks, but it didn’t seem to matter. Their work ethic was superlative. I had the support of the drama teachers, the principal from Prince Andrew, students from York, and two York Course Directors from the Faculty of Education. As former secondary school English teachers, they spent time working with some of the students on their monologues. When Melissa rehearsed her monologue about leaving her grandmother in Jamaica, she was asked to improvise the words that her grandmother might have said to her in her own language. Melissa cried when she shared the monologue with us in the large rehearsal; hearing her grandmother’s voice had brought the experience closer and made the monologue richer, more powerful and more heart wrenching.

On Monday morning, sickness struck a number of students – coughs, sore throats, lethargy. My instinct told me that the sickness had more to do with fear and a lack of confidence than with physical illness. So, when the students were about to go on stage for the afternoon dress rehearsal, I cancelled the tea and sympathy. “No more,” I said. “It is time for you to do what you came here to do.” So the lead singer, who had coughed through earlier rehearsals, found her voice. An actor who worried that
people would laugh at him \textcolor{red}{\text{had he}} sang his heart out. Melissa forget\textcolor{red}{\text{her}} her sore throat, took a breath, and told the story about her grandmother in English and her mother tongue.

After two and a half days in Vancouver, in rehearsals that included finding transitions, dialoguing about sequencing, sharing new ideas, editing and singing, the students were ready. That night, they opened the conference with their hour-long anthology. When it was over, the audience stood, applauded, cheered, and wept.

What did the students say? In some ways you had to be there... The medium really was the message. But here is what words can do:

1. \textbf{Teach us.} The cry for interesting, open-ended, relevant, imaginative teaching was a key message. "The important thing about teachers is that they teach." From all three cities came frustration about teachers who simply told them to open their textbooks and "do the work." Frustration, too that often the "good" teachers did all the "interesting stuff" with the smart kids, giving the average students less stimulating, exciting, dynamic curriculum to tackle.

2. \textbf{Allow us to make mistakes.} School should be a place of experimentation, where mistakes are expected, not penalized.

3. \textbf{Don’t overwhelm us.} Students felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that was expected at one time and wished teachers would confer with their colleagues to balance the workload.

4. \textbf{Extra-curricular activities are important.} Students all agreed that extra-curricular activities are an essential part of the high school experience and wished that teachers would be recognized publicly for the time and effort they devote to students outside the classroom.

5. \textbf{Respect us.} One student reminded us that teachers are not "nobles" and underlined the need for teachers to create a respectful classroom environment where all voices are heard and power struggles minimized. One student, who had already been in six different high schools in three years, told us that only when the administration and teachers saw beyond his reputation and gave him a chance did he begin to succeed.

6. \textbf{Make evaluation procedures transparent.} The students often talked about being confused by the marks they received. They were discouraged by the lack of creativity allowed in response to assignments and wanted more leeway in deciding on how to represent what they were learning.

7. \textbf{Don’t make assumptions about us without getting to...}
know us. Immigrant students wanted their teachers to know how difficult the transition had been and to acknowledge those experiences. In one scene, two students combined their voices in a poem to tell about the need to work to keep food on the table and a smile on the faces of their siblings. One student actor, who worked from midnight to 8 am, was told constantly by teachers, “Come prepared or do not come at all”. Another had dreamt for years about the prom dress that she would wear at graduation. To procure that money, she had to work extra hours to make her dream come true. All of this time eats into school time, they explained, and teachers need to be sensitive to the lives of students outside of school.

8. We are vulnerable. Students told stories of pregnancy, thoughts of suicide, how difficult it was to make friends, how the curriculum is very challenging for some and how often – when it all gets too much – they just feel like quitting.

9. Teachers make all of the difference. Students shared story after story of teachers who went the extra mile, who believed in them and their potential and made positive futures possible. Because of their guidance and teaching, students succeeded academically and socially.

10. We want to succeed. All of the students recognized that half the battle was finding the motivation in themselves to succeed. In a powerful scene near the end of the play, students communicated their desire to succeed despite the difficulties they face.

The cheering and crying during the standing ovation made all of us feel that we had made an impact. In the discussions afterwards, we asked ourselves: Would the telling of these stories allow the audience to recognize themselves and the truths that were being portrayed? Had they been shocked or angered by some of the scenes? But we all agreed: not to tell about the suffering of students would be to tell an incomplete story. The students could only tell the stories from their own experiences. Some were negative; others were positive. It was up to the audience of educational leaders to sift through these stories, learn from them and act on them.

The experience was transformational on many levels and for all participants. The student actors and their teach-
ers felt proud of their work, both in the performance and during the process, and they felt that their voices and experiences were valued. York’s teacher candidates knew they had chosen the right profession, and the theatre students began to think seriously about applying to teacher’s college. We will probably never know the impact that the project had on the student actors, but I caught a glimpse of the potential in an e-mail from Carole Olsen, the Superintendent of the Halifax Board. She wrote:

I know that working with you has created some new defining moments for both our students and staff. They will look back on this experience for the rest of their lives and say, ‘Remember when…’. For one of our students in particular, this opportunity may have transformed her life to the extent that she will choose to remain in high school and graduate. I had the privilege of catching a glimpse of the power of the final production when I observed you working with our students in rehearsal in Halifax. When I spoke to the students on that occasion, I promised them that their voices would be heard and that we would take action on what they told us. I am still committed to following through on that promise.

In fact, the directors/superintendents of education in all three participating boards made arrangements for the students to speak directly to the elected officials and senior staff when they got home.

For me, this experience was the highlight of my career as a drama teacher. I have never been more excited to connect with teachers who share the same passion and belief that I have about the arts, more honoured to work with a diverse range of talented students, more thrilled to create collective theatre from their authentic voices, or more delighted to be doing difficult and provocative work that matters. The effect of the work that took place over the last few months lives on in the DVDs of the performance and the process. I will be forever grateful for Penny’s phone call and for the opportunity to work with students to define our experiences through story and drama and to document the conditions of schools and schooling across Canada in a way that will, I firmly believe, make a difference.

KATHLEEN GOULD LUNDY has been a teacher, consultant and co-ordinator for over 30 years in the Toronto District School Board. Her work with elementary and secondary teachers focuses on helping them understand and advocate for the crucial role that the arts and the imagination play in every student’s education. Her interest lies in teaching those hard-to-reach students who keep parents and teachers awake at night. Presently she is Co-ordinator of Destination Arts at York University.

For information about how to order the Imagine a School DVDs, please visit the CEA website at www.cea-ace.ca.

Notes
1 Penny Milton is the CEO of the Canadian Education Association, publisher of Education Canada.
2 Brendan Docherty, Aaron Armstrong and Lindsey Steinberg
3 Tove Fynbo and Susan Popplewell