

+ A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Engaging Student Voice: Courage on the Journey

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This monograph in the Renewing the Promise series explores the seventh theme that was identified as part of the symposium conversation “Engage Student Voice” and highlights the importance of student voice to foster a sense of belonging in the faith community and strengthen the students’ faith journey.



I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” (Psalm 68:6)

Catholic students find identity in the belief that they are loved by God and made in God’s image and likeness. In a world where students are faced with difficult and confusing choices daily, meeting students where they are on their faith journey is essential. Listening carefully to students’ responses to the gift of faith, helps them to understand God’s love for them, and roots them in identity. “While the world may sometimes make you feel like you are not good enough, not wealthy enough, or not special enough, Jesus knows you perfectly, and loves you without limits.”¹ Asking questions, sharing wonderings and offering opinions in classrooms helps students to be heard, feel included and confidently express challenges of faith. All of these teaching and learning strategies invite student participation into deeper discussions about their relationship with God.

Student well-being is often reflected in how

comfortable students feel using their voice and being heard and respected. Student voice is an effective strategy that engages students and supports them in becoming self-directed, responsible, lifelong learners (Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations 4). When teachers give students a voice in their own learning students are empowered to create, adapt, and evaluate new ideas in light of the common good (Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations 3b). Creating safe environments for students to acknowledge and validate their questions and opinions is a precondition for nurturing inquiring minds.

“As educators create space for students to have more autonomy in their learning, they require an environment that is open to risk-taking and provides opportunities to continually reflect on and persevere through their own learning process — what Watkins (2012) calls “a supportive forum for experimentation.”²

When teachers are present to their students, they listen and understand student voice using a wide-angle lens. Jesus used this lens whenever he interacted with people and his stance is key in

nurturing student voice. It is not just about students hearing their own voices, but it is also about how the teacher responds and works with students to make ideas come to life. Voice invites engagement and participation. Voice is expressed in a variety of ways: in writing, art and drama; in gesture, body language and even silence. In this sense student voice is not something we grant to students, but rather something we tap into. By broadening the definition of how students can and do express voice, educators take diverse approaches to “hearing” student voice.

When student voice is engaged, students have the opportunity to embrace their perspectives with courage, faith and hope. Students need to

explore their faith questions in order to deepen their understanding and Catholic identity. Identity is formed when an individual is given a role in a community. Giving students voice, fosters a sense of belonging in the faith community and strengthens the students’ faith journey.

The framework of ‘Heart, Head and Hands’ is an invitation to reflect and respond to what the heart feels, the head thinks, and the hands can do to teach our students to have voice.

The framework encourages understanding and responding to student voice by all who work in Catholic education.

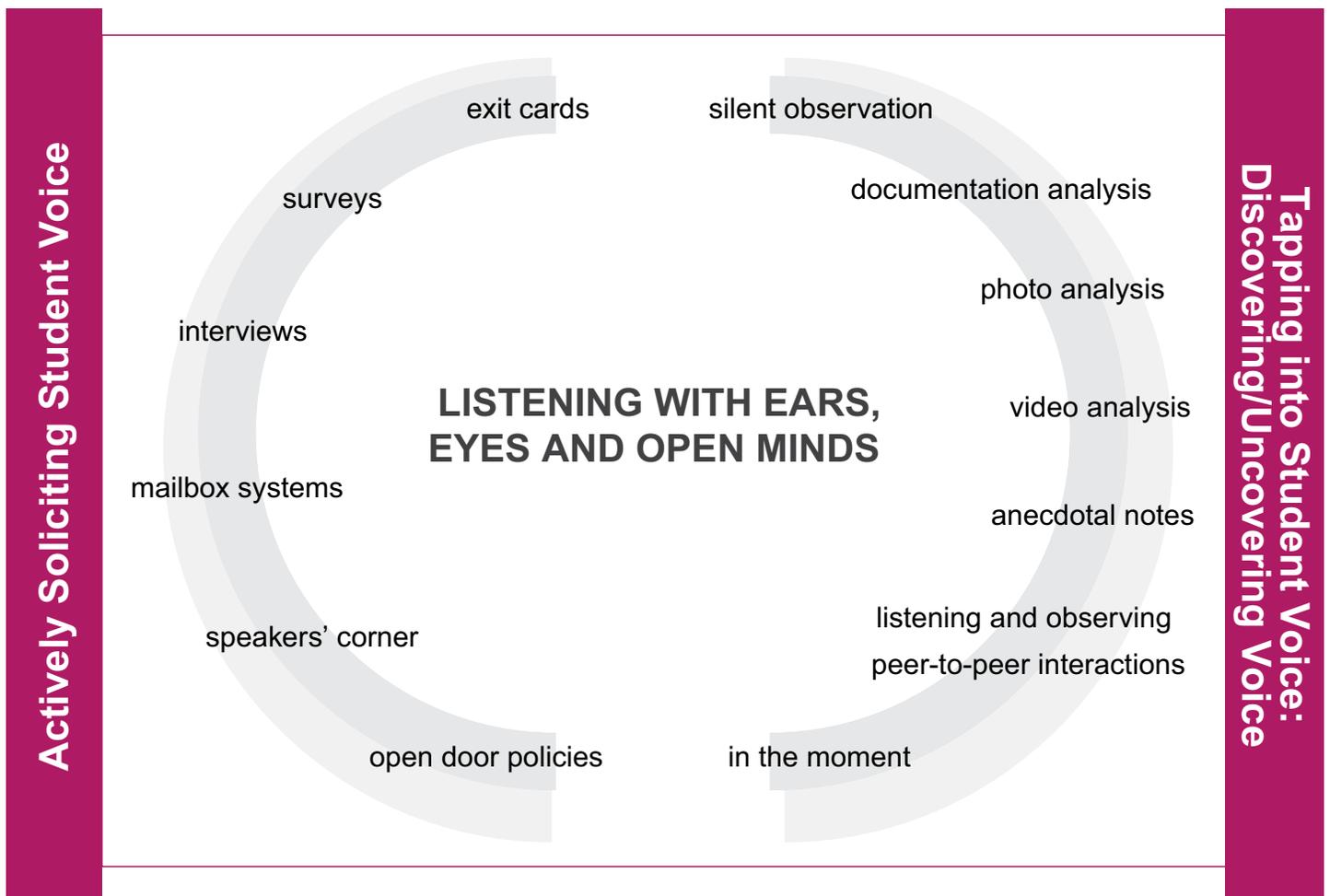
	HEART	HEAD	HANDS
A Framework for Understanding and Responding to Student Voice	<i>‘O Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.’</i> (Psalm 130:2) God listens to our voice.	<i>“The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.”</i> (Psalm 29:4) Voice is a gift from God.	<i>“O Lord open my lips, and my mouth shall tell Your praise.”</i> (Psalm 51:17) God welcomes our voices.
Student	Do I feel safe enough with you to share my questions?	Are you listening to me?	What can you do to help me with this?
Teacher and Education Workers	How do I respond to your questions in a way that values your opinion?	How can I make sure my answers support my students’ growth in Catholic identity?	What opportunities can I provide to help my students participate meaningfully in the Catholic community?
Principals and Vice-principals	How do I ensure that students feel their voice is valued and welcomed?	How can I model authentic listening and being in the moment?	What structure and processes can I put in place to encourage student voice?
Parents	How do I encourage my children to talk about difficult faith questions?	How do I make time for conversations about faith with my children?	How do I help my children to find their voice in the church community?
Support Staff	How can I give students voice?	What can I do to model authentic listening?	How can I support student participation in community initiatives?
Trustees	In my role, how can I invite student dialogue?	How do I model authentic listening?	What communication processes can I put in place to encourage student voice?

	HEART	HEAD	HANDS
Clergy	How can I assure students that I welcome their questions about faith?	How can I engage student voice in church activities?	How can I get students involved in social justice initiatives at my church?
Chaplaincy Leaders	How can I support the school leadership team in growing student voice?	How do I model authentic listening?	What student activities can I facilitate to engage student voice?

The Importance of Listening to Student Voice

Listening to student voice is a shared responsibility. As a community, being present to our students is paramount. When we truly listen to students, students feel respected, valued and empowered. By listening to our students, we show them we truly care about them. Listening is foundational to the building of trusting relationships and is everyone's commitment.

There are many ways we can hear our students' voices. As educators, we can design opportunities for students to make their thinking heard. By encouraging students to ask questions, share ideas, engage in deep discussions and collaborate with each other, we create opportunities for students to express their thoughts and feelings on real issues that are relevant to their world.



The 'Listening with Heart, Head and Hands' (table on page 4) prompts us to reflect on the types of structures and practices we can create to welcome student voice in our classrooms and schools. Actively soliciting student voice and tapping into student thinking shifts the role of the student from passive learner to active thinker and doer who is empowered to take initiative and demonstrate leadership to others.

What Students May 'Do, Feel and Become' in a Responsive Catholic Learning Environment

In Catholic schools today, educators help students understand their lives and cope in the face of deep changes in society. Giving students voice provides an opportunity for students to sift and sort their thinking and make sense of their lives. Students are ready to be active participants in shaping their future and this is particularly important in Catholic schools where young people have sometimes been socialized into the community in ways that did not invite their voice. By nurturing student voice, an environment is created

which invites students to engage with the Catholic tradition and their faith community. Students need opportunities to discuss issues and perspectives presented in the Religious Education and Family Life programs in order to help them to identify, understand and respond to the wisdom and faith of Catholic tradition. In a responsive learning environment that nurtures voice, students are empowered to talk and offer opinions as they grow in confidence in sharing their own voice. They demonstrate this empowerment by what they **do** (personal action taken), what they **feel** (deep engagement) and who they **become** (community minded participants).

DO

Students need to be actively involved in issues that matter to them in order to go deeper with developing their voice. By "doing" students construct their own knowledge on issues. When students' internal development and external connections to the world combine, there is a deeper engagement of students as learners both in school and for life. "Doing" plants

LISTENING WITH HEART, HEAD AND HANDS

Structures	Practices
Religion/ Family Life programs	Faith community celebrations
Open door policies	Welcoming and engaging
Equity policies	Inclusive practices/cultural intelligence
Speak Up initiatives	Acting on concerns
Student publications	Student opinion and expression
Student Council	Student government/responsibility
Student forums	Democracy in action
School clubs	Student leadership and participation
Social agency in church and community	Social justice activism
Ethical Space	Open to learning stance
Anti-bullying/anti-racism initiatives	Values and virtues
Well-being/Self-esteem programs	Mental health awareness
Environmental stewardship	Responsible citizenship
Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations	Connecting faith and learning
Christian Meditation	Prayer and reflection

the seeds for entrepreneurship, creativity and problem solving which are some of the competencies students need in this ever-changing world.

FEEL

Active involvement on issues that matter to students, creates a sense of connection with each other's humanity. They become engaged and motivated to work together and develop sensitivities and understanding of each other's lives. Compassion, empathy and concern for others grows and helps shape an understanding each other's point of view which is key to positive community relationships.



My Dear Young People...The church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls.” (Pope Francis, 2018)

BECOME

Students learn to be active citizens by being involved in their communities. This involvement helps them develop an understanding of the needs and rights of others. They grow in self-respect and respect for others and form attitudes that promote civic engagement. This engagement affirms their awareness that they can make a difference and helps them develop their identity and self-efficacy. Citizenship, student agency and community mindedness evolve.

As students experience active participation within Catholic schools that are focussed on mindfully and consistently inviting their voice, their understanding of Church is formed and informed by their positive experiences engaging with Catholic tradition within a community of faith.

The recent synod on youth, and the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, (Christ is Alive) similarly invites youth to bring their voice to the

Church. Pope Francis' message is addressed not only to young people, but also to the entire People of God, encouraging each of us “to find ways of keeping close to the voices and concerns of young people. Drawing together creates the conditions for the Church to become a place of dialogue and a witness to life-giving fraternity. We need to make more room for the voices of young people to be heard: listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy...At the same time, it sets the conditions for a preaching of the Gospel that can touch the heart truly, decisively and fruitfully.”³

In both tone and content, the Pope's message throughout the document is an exhortation in the true sense of the word: “Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.”⁴

Student voice supports the healthy development of the whole person and deepens understanding of each other's point of view. Encouraging Voice that invites personal action, deep engagement and community mindedness builds communities grounded in positive relationships and responsible citizenship. These communities are the goal of Catholic social teaching which promotes peace, justice and the sacredness of human life. This all starts with giving students voice in Catholic schools and youth voice in the Catholic church.

References

- 1 Renewing the Promise, *A Pastoral Letter for Catholic Education*, 2018, pg. 16
- 2 Capacity Building Series, Student Voice — *Transforming Relationships*, Ministry of Education, Ontario, September 2013 pg. 3
- 3 Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, (Christ is Alive), 38
- 4 Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit*, (Christ is Alive), 299

Monograph Series — Renewing the Promise

Issue	Series	Renewing the Promise Theme	Monograph Title
1	Winter 2018	Framework	<i>Heart, Head, Hands: A Framework for Considering Contemporary Issues in Catholic Education</i>
2	Fall 2018	Moving to Action	<i>Let the Gospels Lead the Way</i>
3	Fall 2018	Nurture Community Relationships	<i>Understanding and Cultivating Authentic Community</i>
4	Fall 2018	Rekindle Mission and Values	<i>Inspiring Students to Love God More</i>
5	Fall 2018	Develop Faith and Catholic Identity	<i>Developing Faith and Identity in Our School Community</i>
6	Winter 2019	Live Faith	<i>The Hope In Our Hearts</i>
7	Spring 2019	Engage Student Voice	<i>Engaging Student Voice: Courage on the Journey</i>
8	Spring 2019	Encourage and Nurture Leadership	<i>Shepherding and Serving</i>

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