Capacity Building Series

Student Voice
Transforming Relationships

Internationally, there has been great interest in supporting student voice (Fielding, 2012). Across Canada, projects have been funded at the secondary level to support increasing opportunities for students to contribute authentically to school improvement. In Ontario, student voice initiatives have historically acknowledged and tried to foster the engagement of older students in learning. Student voice in the SPEAKUP initiative, for example, is "about connecting what's happening in the classroom to real-life experiences outside school," with a focus on supporting students to shape their "learning environment while building skills and abilities" and "preparing for active citizenship" (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/).

Provincial collaborative inquiries are leading educators to become more keenly aware of student voice for younger children as well. They are discovering "how competent and capable of complex thinking" children are when when they are deeply involved in the process of learning (*Ontario Early Years Framework*, 2013). They are discovering that student investment in learning opens new possibilities for children of all ages, not only for learning, but also for engagement and well-being (*Natural Curiosity*, 2011; Toshalis, & Nakkula, 2012).

Nonetheless, challenges abound. This monograph, drawing from international and classroom-based Ontario research, puts the spotlight on both the transformative potential of student voice for younger children and the challenges that educators are beginning to work through as they rethink roles and relationships in elementary education.

Exploring voice, not a quick fix …

" … there is an apprehension about the almost breathless popularity of student voice, with its 'fashionableness' along with the fact that it has become so popular that in a climate of short-termism the interest may burn out before its transformative potential has been understood."

Jean Rudduck
(quoted in Fielding 2007)

Student Achievement Division

support every child
reach every student

Ontario

What are we learning about student voice?

"Student voice" is a metaphor for student engagement and participation in issues that matter to learning. Although practitioners agree that student voice is important, there is less agreement on developmentally appropriate ways for children to participate deeply and meaningfully in their education. What might student participation look like, sound like and be, not just for older students but for younger students as well?

As educators study student learning in collaborative inquiries, they are observing that children express voice 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 that we grant to students, but rather something we tap into. By broadening the definition of how children can and do express voice, educators are taking diverse approaches to "hearing" student voice. The following diagram illustrates some of the ways that students may express their voice.

Broadening Our Understanding of How Children Express Voice

Are we hearing all the children in the classroom express their thinking about their learning? Or as Rudduck asks, "… whose voices are heard in the acoustics of the school?"

"I am something" ...

"When we started writing this book, I could show the world that I am something, instead of just colouring, so that's how it helped me – it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something – and here today, I am doing something, I can actually show the world that I'm not just a colouring person, I can show you that I am something."

English Language Learner
School Effectiveness Framework, 2013
(Component 3)

role play   speaking

in writing   drama

art   self-regulation

conversations with peers   aggression

body language

over-erasing

sleep   incomplete work

non-compliance

at play   gestures

silence

disorganization   conversations with parents at home

A Professional Inquiry into Broadening Conceptions of Voice

How do we tap into students' expressions of voice, including gestures, body language and silence?

How do all forms of expression inform planning?

Working through tensions

Developing reciprocal relationships – with students, parents and colleagues – is critical for sharing ownership for learning. Many observe that as students are made partners in decisions about their learning, motivation and perseverance grow, resulting in new and more in-depth learning (Watkins, 2009). Yet promoting more autonomy for learners may not be easy to achieve. Fielding, for example, suggests that it "requires a transformation of what it means to be a student; what it means to be a teacher. In effect, it requires the intermingling and interdependence of both" (2004). Partnering with students to engage them in learning, in other words, calls for a pedagogical shift – what some describe as a shift from *teaching* to *learning* (Watkins, 2009).

As educators begin to make this shift, some express a tension between teaching the curriculum and empowering students to become partners in learning. One educator in a provincial collaborative inquiry put it this way, "There are two systems at play – a learning culture versus a grading culture – educators feel bound by the curriculum and guidelines. We support a learning, inquiry-based culture but feel constrained by mandated curriculum and reporting requirements."

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" where educators can talk about the tensions that emerge from new roles and responsibilities. The following sections explore how educators across Ontario are taking action to navigate these tensions by: (1) connecting the whole school community, (2) fostering reciprocal relationships with students, (3) exploring a pedagogical mindset and (4) co-creating a responsive learning environment.

CONNECTING THE WHOLE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

While there exists great anticipation in what is possible when we engage students in their own learning, the challenge remains in hearing the voices of all students. This goal is best achieved when educators work collaboratively on a whole school focus on student engagement. Principals play a key role in honouring student voice and developing a school culture that promotes it.

An environment that supports student voice encompasses more than a classroom; it is all of the educators and caregivers that students interact with in the school setting. In the words of Rudduck and Flutter, "the principles and values of pupil voice and participation are threaded through the daily interactions and communications of school life and reflect a coherent and widely supported set of values and principles" (cited in Fielding, 2007).

The focus on student engagement impacts how school administrators and system support staff work with classroom educators. It informs all of the work in the school "... since for students school is a holistic experience: it is about lessons, it is about what happens between lessons and it is about the regimes that define who and what matter to the school" (Fielding, 2007).

Schools that have struggled with student engagement and achievement are finding that utilizing student voice as a whole school approach can shift the culture from a deficit focus to a growth mindset. In the schools that are exploring student inquiry as a way to enhance voice and engagement, educators are finding that their students are more focused and that student learning is exceeding their expectations (*Natural Curiosity*, 2011). Further, as students begin to feel more competent and confident,

"A rupture of the ordinary" ...

"Transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary and this demands as much of teachers as it does of students."

(Fielding, 2004)

student behaviour is also improving. This cycle of success has led to powerful transformations in classroom practice. In the words of Peacock, "Where this culture extends to the entire school, an exciting 'can do' atmosphere pervades leading to the sense that almost anything is possible or within reach" (2011).

A Professional Inquiry into Defining Values

Make a social network map of the relationships in your school ... does each student have multiple connections to different caring adults who know and value them as human beings?

What beliefs and values about student voice are widely shared by the members of your school community?

What school-wide habits and practices routinely communicate these beliefs and values to your students?

What actions can you take to strengthen communication about these beliefs and values?

FOSTERING RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Educators are fostering reciprocal relationships with their students by including them in co-creating learning opportunities, co-designing the learning space and co-constructing assessment (including assessments of their own learning and the learning of their peers). They are confirming the view of many researchers in seeing the value of partnering with their students (Peacock, 2011), recognizing the importance of ownership in the learning both for themselves and their students. In these reciprocal relationships, educators are finding ways to include student voice throughout the day.

As educators become more open to student voice, they are finding that they are learning about their own learning as well. They are adopting "a learning stance" that affirms "the image of children and teachers as capable, resourceful, powerful protagonists of their own experience" (Wien, 2008). They are opening up spaces and ways for students to demonstrate their ideas and share their thinking. As educators collaborate to analyze and discuss next steps in the learning process, they open up spaces to share ideas and express their own thinking as well.

In building trusting and reciprocal relationships, traditional roles shift. As educators carefully listen and observe, they are providing responsive guidance rather than engaging in teaching without attending to listening. Educators are diligently working to find harmony in this way of working so that they can continually engage and motivate students. In these relationships, educator and student learning and efficacy are growing. In the words of an educator participating in a provincial collaborative inquiry, "A shift in the teacher-student relationship occurs when the teacher is listening, respecting the child's voice. The child talks more and begins to share ideas more confidently. Finding the balance is critical, and requires ongoing reflection."

Educators are also seeing the value of peer interaction and providing opportunities for students to work together in various types of groupings so that they can explore common interests, share various perspectives and build on each other's learning. Again, quoting from an Ontario educator, "[They] have learned to trust their students and trust that when children are given a degree of autonomy over their own learning they will work and learn, and that the children are capable of learning from each other (often more effectively than from the teacher). This transformative practice has seen all of these educators moving toward co-constructing learning with students and away from teaching students."

Discovering voice

" ... it was our decision as to whether we wanted to learn or not, it didn't become something where, it's like – take notes from the textbook – I don't want to criticize the textbook, but sometimes that's what can happen – and it takes away the critical thinking from the idea."

"When you listen to the teacher and you like – oh - I understand what she's going at, so then you can build on with the teacher and you can even have a discussion with the teacher and kind of do a back and forth."

Grade 7/8 students
School Effectiveness Framework, 2013
(Component 4)

A Professional Inquiry into Fostering Reciprocity

Test the waters and ask a handful of students about what they are learning. Ask a class who is responsible for learning. What do students say? (Watkins, 2009)

How do students at your school voice their thinking about their learning and other school issues?

What actions can you take to give students more opportunities to express their voice?

If you expand opportunities for students to have a stronger voice in classroom and school learning, how will you identify the impact of this action on student learning?
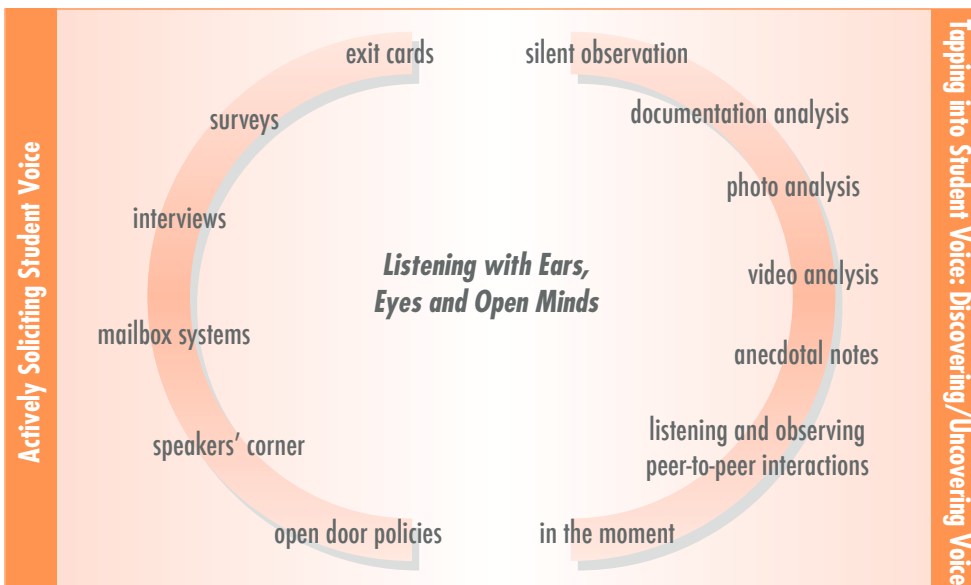
EXPLORING A PEDAGOGICAL MINDSET

Educators are embracing "a pedagogical mindset" to address the tensions that are inherent when embedding student voice within the curriculum. They are finding that three apsects of a pedagogical mindset are particularly helpful in dealing with these tensions and supporting both student and educator learning. Each is explored briefly below.

1. Developing a Pedagogy of Listening

Educators are grasping the importance of "developing a pedagogy of listening" (Gandini, L., & Kaminsky, 2004; Rinaldi, 2004), where they spend more time listening to their students and helping them build on one another's ideas. They are more than ever tuning into the diverse ways that students are expressing their thinking. Listening to students, deeply and authentically, requires an awareness of our biases and preconceptions as these affect what we hear.

Educators who are developing a pedagogy of listening to inform their work are seeing a dramatic impact on their daily classroom practice. As one Ontario educator commented, "We actively listen to what our students are telling us and they construct the learning with us. We acknowledge and validate their questions, ideas, suppositions and opinions and provide them choice in their learning." A pedagogy of listening often includes documenting evidence in the various forms that make student thinking visible and provide a record for discussion, reflection and analysis. This process is ongoing and is used to support growth and improvement (*Capacity Building Series* – Pedagogical Documentation, 2012).

Diverse Approaches to "Hearing" Student Voice

Actively Soliciting Student Voice

Tapping into Student Voice: Discovering/Uncovering Voice

Listening with Ears, Eyes and Open Minds

- exit cards
- silent observation
- surveys
- documentation analysis
- photo analysis
- interviews
- video analysis
- mailbox systems
- anecdotal notes
- speakers' corner
- listening and observing peer-to-peer interactions
- open door policies
- in the moment

Every child should feel he or she belongs …

"Every child should feel that he or she belongs, is a valuable contributor to his or her surroundings, and deserves the opportunity to succeed. When we recognize children as capable and curious, we are more likely to deliver programs and services that value and build on their strengths and abilities."

(*Ontario Early Years Framework*, 2013)

"Educators need to understand what they can about the different social, economic, and cultural contexts of their students and how these influence their efforts. It is beneficial to view these differences not as impediments to overcome, but as resources that can enhance learning."

(Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012)

2. Developing Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation has provided educators with a vehicle for including student voice in their practice so that feedback can be individualized and precise. Utilizing a pedagogy of listening, educators are broadening their view of what type of evidence should be collected and how it can support learning. As one Ontario educator commented, "As the process developed, the educators moved toward more multimodal evidence. They started to take a greater interest in the nonverbal communication and exchanges between children instead of just looking at individual children."

Pedagogical documentation can encourage partnerships to support peer and and student self-assessments. As one team of Ontario educators discovered, "In response to the documentation, quiet students suddenly had more to show and share, providing more insight into their learning." As educators document student learning, they are able to "see" and "hear" students in an authentic way and arrive at a fuller picture of their learning. Further, as they engage in documentation, they are realizing that their students often have more knowledge and skills than they thought. As one Ontario educator observed, "We engage in student-based planning, related to the curriculum, rather than curriculum-based planning alone (know your students). The triangulation of evidence, especially observations and conversations, play a critical role for planning with students in mind."

Evidence relating to the student experience in classrooms is the catalyst as well for changes in educators' actions, practice and understanding. Student experience becomes the subject of professional learning – engaging teachers in observation, analysis and responsive interaction with students. Students feel their ideas are valued, helping them to build confidence and a "growth mindset" about their own learning over time (Dweck, 2006).

3. Developing a Pedagogy of Inquiry

As educators use inquiry approaches to provide students with opportunities to work with their strengths and pursue ideas and interests they are passionate about, they are putting "learners in the driving seat" (Watkins, 2009). As they partner with students to negotiate learning and "to promote learner autonomy" (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007), they are confirming what researchers have found for secondary students – namely, that when elementary students feel more ownership for their learning, they become more engaged and more likely to persevere to overcome challenges.

Educators are looking at new ways of designing daily learning opportunities for students as well as developing long-range plans. As they look to their students' interests, strengths and ideas for the co-creation of learning opportunities, they realize that for engagement and authentic learning to take place, they must be responsive to the students' voices in these areas. Educators who utilize this approach have seen how effectively student inquiries can be embedded in the curriculum, particularly in integrated and "real world" ways. In the words of an Ontario educator, "We are learning that students have ideas that they want to pursue, and that they have capacity to work together to complete tasks and express themselves, so we are working in ways to give them voice, audiences for their activity and guidance in responsive ways."

CO-CREATING A RESPONSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

"We need to build our classrooms around the voices in the room."

"Upon reflection, we realized that student voice is much more than their recording on an app and describing their learning, it's on the walls of our classroom, it's in the co-construction of the physical layout and most evident in the inquiry work."

Educators, Provincial Collaborative Inquiries

A caring, safe and healthy environment creates a space for students to express their voice in a way that supports their learning and well-being. In partnerships with students, educators are realizing the potential of the environment to be a "third teacher" – one that is "responsive to student interests, provide[s] opportunities for children to make their thinking visible and then foster[s] learning and engagement" (Fraser, & Gestwicki, 2012).

When educators listen to student voice and use it to co-create the learning environment, students feel they are an integral part of a learning community, that they matter and that they have something of value to offer (Fielding, 2007). This empowers them to take responsibility for their own learning, and that of others, and to take risks and explore new ideas. According to Shanker, taking responsibility for learning and that of others "is the most authentic opportunity that students can have to develop self-regulation in the classroom" (2013).

In an environment where educators listen, capture and are responsive to student voice, they have noticed that students believe they are capable and competent to learn. The diagram below illustrates what children may "Do," "Feel" and "Be" when they are in a responsive learning environment.

What Students May "Do," "Feel" and "Be" When in a Responsive Learning Environment

Do
- participate in issues that matter to them
- shape and contribute to their learning environment
- belong in meaningful partnerships

Feel
- learner autonomy
- agency
- self-efficacy
- collective efficacy
- respect
- belonging
- motivated
- connected to their environment

Be
- in the driver seat of their own learning
- self-regulator
- curious
- an active citizen
- engaged

When all students feel included ...
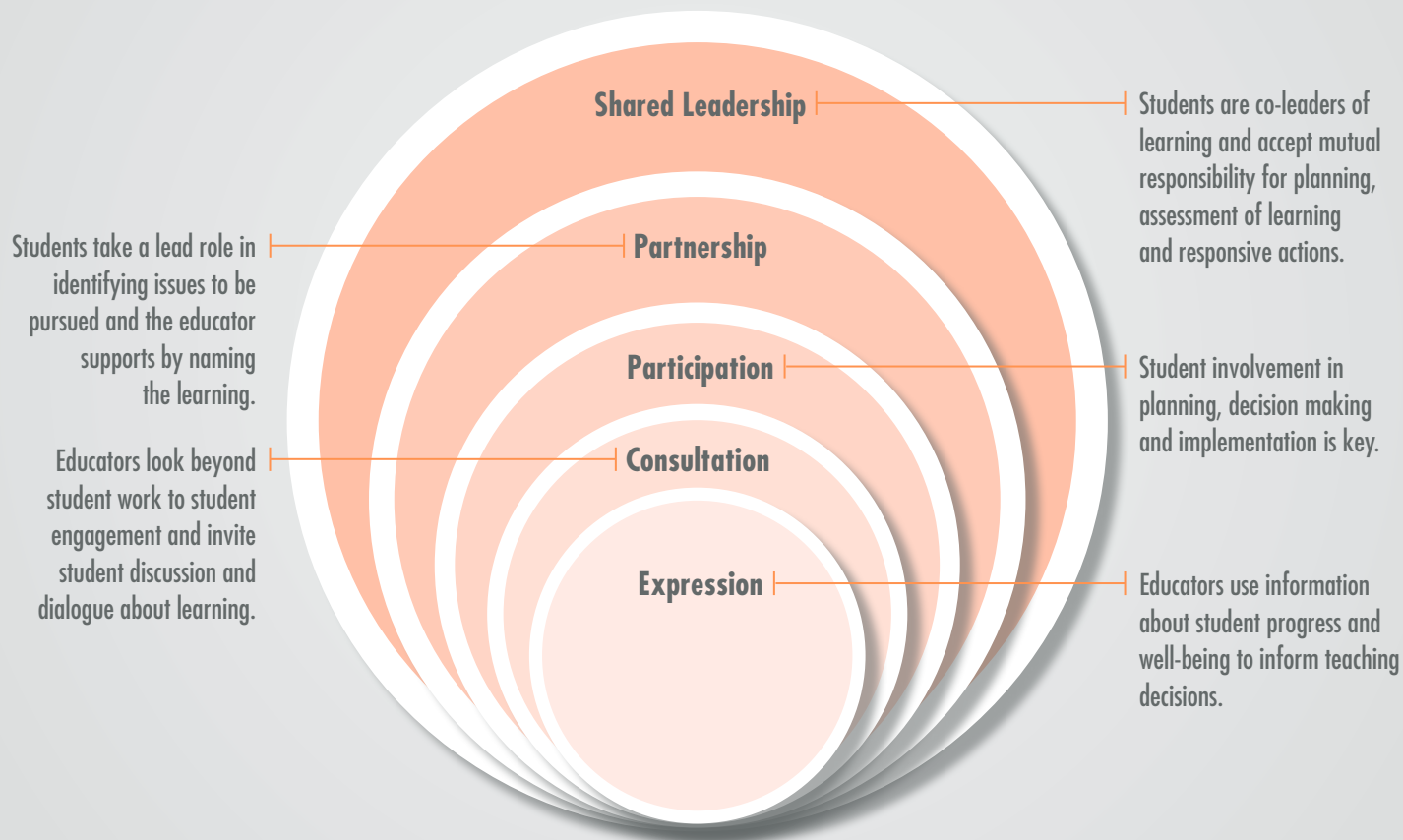
"It is important that teachers create an environment that will foster a sense of community, where all students feel included and appreciated and where their perspectives are treated with respect. One way of accomplishing this is for teachers to select topics, resources, and examples that reflect the diversity in the classroom."

(*Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6*, revised 2013)

Envisioning Student Voice

You may wish to use this graphic to describe and discuss the types of interactions you have with students and to envision the possibilities in terms of student partnerships!

Shared Leadership — Students are co-leaders of learning and accept mutual responsibility for planning, assessment of learning and responsive actions.

Partnership — Students take a lead role in identifying issues to be pursued and the educator supports by naming the learning.

Participation — Student involvement in planning, decision making and implementation is key.

Consultation — Educators look beyond student work to student engagement and invite student discussion and dialogue about learning.

Expression — Educators use information about student progress and well-being to inform teaching decisions.

Informed by Ontario collaborative inquiry participants and by the work of Michael Fielding (2012), "Beyond Student Voice: Patterns of Partnership and the Demands of Deep Democracy"; Eric Toshalis & Michael J. Nakkula (2012), "Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice"; Roger Hart (1992). *Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship.*

References and Related Reading

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success. How we can learn to fulfill our potential.* New York: Random House.

Fielding, M. (2012). Beyond student voice: Patterns of partnership and the demands of deep democracy [Más allá de la voz del alumnado: patrones de colaboración y las exigencias de la democracia profunda]. *Revista de Educación,* 359, 45–65.

Fielding, M. (2007). Jean Rudduck (1937–2007). "Carving a new order of experience": A preliminary appreciation of the work of Jean Rudduck in the field of student voice. *Education Action Research,* 323–336

Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. British Educational Research Journal,30(2), 295–311.

Fraser, S., & Gestwicki, C. (2012). *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom.* Delmar & Thomson Learning.

Gandini, L., & Kaminsky, J. A. (2004). Reflections on the relationship between documentation and assessment in the American context: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA FYFE. *Innovations in Early Education: The International Reggio Exchange,* 11(11), 5–17.

Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship.* Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

Natural Curiosity: Building children's understanding of the world through environmental inquiry/A resource for teachers. (2011). Toronto: The Laboratory School at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study.

Peacock, A. (2011). Beyond Assessment Levels: Reaching for new heights in primary education. *Education Review,* 23(2), 14–22.

Rinaldi, C. (2004). The relationship between documentation and assessment. *The Quarterly Periodical of the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance,* 11(1).

Shanker, S. (2013). *Calm, alert, and learning: Classroom strategies for self-regulation.* Toronto, ON: Pearson Canada.

Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice. *The Education Digest,* 29–35

Watkins, C. (2009) Learners in the driving seat. *Leading Learning Pedagogy,* 1(2), 28–31. www.teachingtimes.com.

Watkins, C., Carnell, E., & Lodge, C. (2007). *Effective learning in classrooms.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Wien, C. (2008). *Emergent curriculum in the primary classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ontario Ministry of Education Resources
Curriculum Documents
The Ontario Curriculum: The Arts (revised) (2009)
The Ontario Curriculum: Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6 & History and Geography, Grades 7 and 8 (revised) (2013)
Ontario Early Years Framework (2013)
School Effectiveness Framework (2013)

Capacity Building Series
Getting Started with Student Inquiry (2011)
Student Identity and Engagement (2011)
The Third Teacher (2012)
Pedagogical Documentation (2012)

Provincial Collaborative Inquiry
"Student Voice" has quoted educators participating in the following:
- Collaborative Inquiry in Learning – Mathematics (CIL-M)
- Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry (EPCI)
- Literacy Leaders
- Student Work Study Teacher (SWST)