

# **The Wisdom of Youth: How Modern Ontario Roman Catholic Students Challenge and Resist the Persistent Colonial Agenda**

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## **Abstract**

Youth today in Roman Catholic schools are not experiencing the complete freedom of an identity that is unique and valued. They describe the Ontario Roman Catholic school system as if it is still an agent of colonial forces, maintaining imperial power through denominational religious elitism. Using a critical ethnographic methodology within a single revelatory case study, through the lens of an anti-colonial discursive framework, this study presents the voices of diverse youth in Ontario Roman Catholic schools who demand a change in the system to modernize in both form and method of knowledge delivery and content toward acknowledging the diversity of racialized and religious bodies in the corridors.

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic schooling, Ontario, anti-colonialism

## **Résumé**

Les jeunes dans les écoles catholiques aujourd'hui ne connaissent pas la liberté complète d'une identité qui est unique et estimée. Ils décrivent et comparent le système scolaire catholique en Ontario comme étant un agent des forces coloniales qui maintient un pouvoir impérial par l'élitisme religieux et confessionnel. En utilisant une méthodologie ethnographique critique dans une étude de cas révélatrice au travers d'un cadre discursif anticolonial, cette étude présente les voix de divers jeunes dans les écoles catholiques en Ontario. Ils réclament un changement dans le système scolaire afin de moderniser à la fois la forme et la méthode de transmission des connaissances ainsi que le contenu, vers une reconnaissance de la diversité des groupes religieux et raciaux dans les couloirs.

**Mots-clés :** Enseignement catholique, Ontario, anticolonialisme

## **The Wisdom of Youth: How Modern Ontario Roman Catholic Students Challenge and Resist the Persistent Colonial Agenda**

### **Introduction**

Youth are very intuitive. Their language and expressions are forthright and genuine. They want to fit in. They want to be respected and appreciated as individuals. They want to share their stories, their beliefs, their concerns, fears, and joys. They want to learn and develop skills that will ensure a successful professional and progressive home life. School is a natural space for youth to expand and manoeuvre their lived experiences and emotional growth toward achieving these goals.

Yet today's youth, both Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic, are not experiencing the complete freedom of an identity that is unique and valued in their schools. They describe the Ontario Roman Catholic school system as if it is still an agent of colonial forces, maintaining imperial power through denominational religious elitism. Youth saliently acknowledge marginalization and the need to hide their true identity and faith in their discussions and actions within the corridors of Roman Catholic secondary schools. They demand a change in the system to modernize in both the form and method of knowledge delivery and content toward the goal of acknowledging the diversity of racialized and religious bodies in the corridors.

In order to investigate resistance to colonial norms through diverse religious and spiritual identities in secondary-level youth, a single-case study methodology was employed using a critical ethnographic approach within an anti-colonial discursive framework. The methodology incorporated survey and interview data from 10 Roman Catholic secondary schools across the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), of which 600 surveys were randomly distributed to students and their respective parent or guardian. Students returned 71 surveys, and parents returned 69 surveys. Of the 71 student surveys, 15 students volunteered freely, and with parental permission, to participate in an interview process. Ten informal interviews were also conducted with Roman Catholic administrators and teachers. The primary research objectives were to investigate how youth in modern Ontario Roman Catholic schools define their own identity, what identity in faith they may claim, and how their schooling environment supports their identity. This research intends to fill that void, offering an investigation into a particular identity of youth in Roman Catholic schools from the perspective of a non-Roman Catholic sociologist raised in the public/secular education system of Ontario, Canada.

### **Freedom of Identity: Confidence, Challenges, and Miscues**

What is missing consistently within all the political, social, and economic debates on the form, function, and impact of religious schools and schooling are the perspectives of the clients who are most affected by the evolving environment and educational output: their youth. The lack of student perspectives and voices in modern sociological literature reflects society's tendency to ignore their voices (Dei et al., 2000). Within Roman Catholic secondary schools across the province of Ontario, these youth voices are often presented through the assumptions and representations of religious educators or associative agencies, such as the Institute for Catholic Education. To provide youth with a voice in an anti-colonial discursive framework and critical ethnographic study is to solidify not only a right to expression, but also to legitimate influence on power in privilege in discussion and action. If youth are not empowered with the knowledge that their histories and subjectivities are of equal or greater

value to the lived experience in modern schooling, then the system itself cannot be a safe space of genuine inclusivity.

Fifteen youth were interviewed for this research. Their voices are genuine and critical to understanding the lived perspective of faith and Roman Catholic schooling. However, this small representative proportion of Ontario Roman Catholic secondary schools speaks to either the apathy of the generation, shyness of self-exposure to teachers and the school community at large, or fear that exposure of religious diversity or environmental dissatisfaction might prompt a public outcry to reconsider funding, equal status, or legitimacy of the system to the provincial public. Students, who are willing to discuss personal and emotional issues in an open dialogue with a perceived stranger and person in a position of authority, take a chance on having their voice regarded as valuable. Having a voice is only made critical when heard.

As some of the youth interviewed suggested, some students may be too afraid of being seen as “uncool” if they admit to participating in anything revolving around issues of faith. Moreover, issues of religion, spirituality, or faith can prove to be uncomfortable discussions for many in the modern era. Yet the students who offered their words for this research—albeit some shy, some unconvinced their comments would not be used against them, and some eager to talk about their commitment to faith—were all students who volunteered their voice and experience on the topic. All of the youth interviewed put forth that possessing a religious or spiritual identity was personally important or relevant. Prior to the interviews, the quantitative data from the surveys offered that 82% of the students connect with religious practice, while 56% identify with being “spiritual” outside of the traditional image of religious doctrine, expectation, or belief. These numbers are only slightly higher than the statistics offered by Bibby (2001, p. 254) in his large-scale sociological survey work suggesting that, in Canada, 76% of teens identify with a religious or spiritual group and 48% identify as having spiritual needs. Modern youth appear to present that religion or spirituality is a positive aspect of their identity, albeit with each student interpreting this aspect of their identity in a personal and unique way.

Whether youth internalize a positive religious identity or not, they associate religion with stereotypical expectations, particularly that it is laden with routine. The concept of being “religious” is plagued with conforming ritualistic acts and students either embrace the security of routine or are quick to name it as burdensome and smothering. The onus associated with religion and religious concepts appears to disappoint and discourage students’ attempts to discuss their understanding or impressions of faith. As Randy\*—a Grade 12 student who both embraces and challenges an evolving Catholic faith—suggested, “When someone is religious you feel that they have to say certain things, they’re biased. They think a certain way just because they’re taught to be that way.” Students appear to associate a pressure to conform in an imposing and devaluing way when the concept of religion as a way of life or, more specifically, of being Roman Catholicism is broached in classroom discussions. The educators involved in this research all agree that the term Roman Catholic or any use of the Catholic religion with students instantly results in negative feedback and resistance to further discussion. As Randy further suggested, “When you’re religious I think you can be caught up with unmeaningful rituals and practices, and you can be more quote-unquote ‘fake’ just by being religious.” Fourteen of the 15 students interviewed, all senior students, supported the need for schools to move beyond denominational dialogue and incorporate a language that is more holistic and spiritual in context and not infused with an institutionalized and systemic Church-approved vocabulary.

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\* The names presented here of all participating students and educators are fictional to maintain anonymity.

The concept of spirituality appears to mean something distinct from religion for these students. There is an appreciation of the concept of spirituality outside of religion, as most vocally expressed by the older and senior youth interviewed. The tone changed within discussions of spirituality, with a sense of the ethereal or lived emotional connection being verbalized by the students, such as Grade 10 student Elisa's statement that "being spiritual is like you know there is life after, like you know that it's not all fake, there's meaning to life." Another student, Taras, reflected that spirituality outside of religion focuses on "self, inner peace." Elisa offered that as a Sikh student in a Catholic school, it was her contention that the spiritual was influential to helping her embrace the differences between her religion and Catholicism, while Taras—who as a Grade 10 Catholic, felt his ancestral connections to his father's homeland of Mexico—brought the concept of spirituality into his understanding of what the roots of Catholicism represented for his family. Another student, Randy, proposed the alternative perspective that "when you are a spiritual person you're more directed towards God ultimately."

Interestingly perhaps, some of the younger youth interviewed, such as Philip (a Grade 9 practicing Catholic who is temporarily living with his Aunt's family while his own family contemplates a permanent move from South Korea) and Adriana (a very shy Grade 9 occasional-practicing Catholic who did not distinctly want to separate the concept of spirituality from religion), suggested the terms were coterminous and interwoven. Spirituality has different meaning for different people, but youth do interpret it as a final destination of religious pursuit. In accordance with Dei et al. (2000), youth offer that "religion is part of their understanding of spirituality in that religion and religious values help mold personal character" (p. 62). As Philip further implies, having religion helps inspire spirituality, yet "being religious does not equate to being spiritual." Religion can be perceived as a code or instructions for living one's life, while spirituality is the act of living according to the interpretation of that code:

Educators must distinguish between doctrine and enforcement of religious norms and values, on the one hand, and the enunciations of values, norms and beliefs that guide a people's sense of self, personhood, individual and collective actualization, as well as relations with each other and their environments. (Dei et al., 2000, p. 63)

### **Interpreting the Language of Faith**

When asked if they felt comfortable expressing their religious/spiritual views in any of their classes or with peers, the surveyed students responded 'yes' 82% of the time. When asked if their beliefs were treated with respect by schoolteachers, guidance counselors, vice-principals, principals, and/or Chaplains, the students responded overwhelmingly positive 90% of the time. However the same youth suggested that their beliefs were treated with respect by peers only 76% of the time. In turn, only half of the surveyed students offered that their religion is a topic of discussion in peer groups.

The distinction between offering religious discussion during class time compared to discussion during personal time suggests that students are acknowledging an expected agenda of time and place to talk about their faith, and outside of the classroom is not approved space. Although the directive of religious or spiritual education is to encourage development of religious language, concepts, and ideas within the Roman Catholic faith and worldview (ICE, 2006, p.2), the impact outside of the religion classroom appears to lose strength and is not applied in the corridors of Roman Catholic secondary schools.

Dennis Murphy (2003) suggests the role of a Roman Catholic teacher is to challenge and assist youth to look at the world and understand or interpret their sense of lived space and

identity through a lens of faith. This interpretation on the part of youth is to be reflected in all they do, see, and say. The challenge, according to Murphy is:

[To] make the language of the school and the classroom a language that resonates with sounds of community, of society, of social responsibility and social solidarity. . . . It is a language which stands at an oblique remove from the individualism of our time. (p. 21)

As Lois Sweet (1997) remarks, “Religious literacy is not just knowledge of one’s own beliefs, but is also a capacity to encounter and analyze respectfully the religious views of others, to see the enterprise as personally worthwhile” (p. 228). Many of the young people sitting in Roman Catholic classrooms today have little knowledge of the history of church faith. Literacy and language in faith are two predominant aspects of modern Ontario Roman Catholic schools. Much like an unidentified Roman Catholic school student remarked in Mulligan’s (1990) research, “We need to educate the students that it’s not uncool to believe” (p. 170). However, if a stigma exists surrounding students talking about religious or spiritual identity amongst themselves, then the challenges of Roman Catholic educators are compounded from both within the institutional framework of maintaining language that suits the “status quo,” as well as outside the institution in a modern image of “what’s popular.”

The students supported the notion that promoting a Roman Catholic faith or another faith identity has negative social connotations in society. Elaine, an open-hearted and passionate Grade 10 student, provided much insight on the diversity in youth spiritual belief and racial identification during our very candid interview. Although baptized Catholic and someone who attends church and church youth groups regularly, her own sense of herself was that of a spiritual being not constricted by a denominational belief system. Elaine offered unabashedly: “I think that we’re taught to be ashamed if one is proud of their religion or spirituality. Because it’s different and, for some reason, different isn’t seen as good anymore.” Peer pressure to avoid being openly religious or display any sense of spirituality goes against the expectation of, as Shazia (a Grade 9, occasionally practicing Catholic) put forth, “fitting in.” In response, many students internalize their beliefs and hide their true religious or spiritual identity. As Harmeet (a Grade 10, practicing Anglican) shared, “It’s not cool to be religious. Therefore students don’t act . . . very proud when they are.”

Some youth, however, do express that their self-identity is empowered within the system. Marian, who self-identified as a practicing Pentecostal Christian, offered, “I think that’s the beauty of the Catholic school system, you’re able to kind of accommodate everybody.” The same sentiments were shared by Elisa who proudly identified herself as being Sikh and prided herself on wanting to share in the diversity of her community, both to offer difference and to accept the difference in others. For Elaine, the “spirituality” and “open-minded” aspect that she internalizes through her life as a baptized Roman Catholic who offers a spiritual lens of interpretation, being in a Roman Catholic school provides strength and hope in the midst of being a confused teenager. Each of these girls strongly insisted that faith, as opposed to a defined denominational identity, was an aspect of self worth displaying and sharing, not as a means to assimilate others, but to offer true aspects of who they are in their schools and in their larger communities.

### **Resistance to a False Identity**

For non-Roman Catholic students to discuss their identities and manipulated spaces in modern Ontario Roman Catholic secondary school corridors, identifiers of race and class become interwoven points of note. Just as Elisa merged faith and race in a discussion on

community judgment “in the aftermath of “9/11,” students acknowledge skin color as a signifier of race, and in a Roman Catholic school setting it also signifies religious identity. Randy was honest in offering “if you see an Indian, you can mostly guess, 90% of the time, that they are Sikhs.” In contrast, the projection of white and European suggests Christian, and more specifically Roman Catholic. For other youth, race is not as clear-cut in determining religious identity. The conformity of religious identity, accepted or otherwise, appears to them to be a sub-text intertwined with observations of the ‘Other.’ Yet, as Elaine suggested, if one’s resistance to the conformity can overshadow the colonial identity placed on oneself by family and schooling, then an opportunity exists to expand personal conviction within a faith identity.

Marian has chosen to resist the conformity and confines of an expected identity in faith through “ignorance,” yet she has chosen not to remain quiet when the concept of difference wavers toward an imposed hierarchy of self-identity unbecoming the body being named. Her reference to “ignorance” in this case works to the advantage of the minoritized youth by providing a resistance to the imposition of racial and religious supremacy within the system. Marian tenuously suggested that at her school she did not think that “people do it intentionally,” referring to segregation from other racial identities. She places blame on the community, parents, and youth for inspiring discrimination, inferiority, and “barriers” in school and society. Yet, the identity that is placed on her by peers and teachers is “not going to stop me from doing what I do.”

Peer discrimination was highlighted in the dialogue with Philip. As a Roman Catholic, Philip is fearful of religious assimilation because of the level of faith diversity in his school. He offered that a “more diversified student body does not strengthen Catholic school community or faith with students.” He put forth that his religious conviction is very strong, but “Catholic schooling should strengthen the faith of its Catholic students first, before offering knowledge of other religions.” The vocalization of his fear was explained through a discussion of his lived experience in South Korea up until two years ago, where his Roman Catholic identity made up a small minority in a 25% Buddhist, 25% Christian and 25% atheist population. Claiming a lived experience of religious persecution in his South Korean school provides diasporic insight into Philip’s stance. His fearful voice is that of the colonized and also one who is not exposed to the theology of liberation that exists in some Roman Catholic communities. He has brought the fear of continued oppression with him to the Toronto CMA and his present-day Roman Catholic schooling experience. He represents the historic resistance of the Roman Catholic struggle for equality in the Ontario political, social, and economic arenas. He further aligns himself with other Asian students who are similarly convicted in their Roman Catholic faith. The strength that he receives from this alliance supports his directive to resist assimilation by the ‘Other’ in his new school.

According to non-Roman Catholic youth, their schooling environments are not always comfortable spaces for expressing an ‘Other’ identity. Being exposed as different in faith highlights that the system that is not homogenous. Not “fitting in” with the accepted majority results in some level of ridicule or alienation. Mr. Domitrovich—a first-generation visible minority Roman Catholic student in Ontario and now an educator in the Roman Catholic system—suggests that non-Roman Catholic families are “not going to be the kind of group to stir the pot,” as “first-generation, new immigrants they’re really just appreciative of being in Canada, attending Catholic education.” Further, he adds, “There’s a culture of supremacy in the Roman Catholic environment. So to shed a spotlight on the fact that you are not part of the dominant group goes counter to the need for youth to belong.”

Even though some students do not internalize the stigma associated with being different, other aspects of one’s identity strengthen the flaws in the system. Harmeet, whose family has lived in the Toronto CMA for generations and who identifies as white at a

predominantly white school, admits to being singled out to discuss her non-Roman Catholic religion in class. However, in the case of Ashley, a Grade 9 non-Catholic Christian, her diasporic roots do not offer strength and space for conviction in faith. Ashley, whose faith and race fit outside the majority at her Toronto CMA secondary school, expressed how she feels most uncomfortable discussing her non-Roman Catholic status in school, especially amongst or in front of her peers. Her rationale, in response to students like Philip, is in parallel with Marian's assessment of the community putting up barriers signifying difference and in turn creating a polarity of supremacy and acceptance in race and religion. Within W.E.B. Dubois' theory of double consciousness (Harrison 1990), Ashley quantifies her previous knowledge-base from a Roman Catholic elementary experience in Jamaica even though she self-identifies as Christian, and not Roman Catholic. Her upbringing within a Roman Catholic primary experience makes it easier for her to be perceived as belonging within a Roman Catholic environment, as one of the "accepted." Her identity as the 'Other,' both in faith and race, compound her need to fit in and feel accepted. She chooses to "ignore" the call for self-identification out of fear of exposure and reprisal.

Race and roots appear to be interwoven into publicly vocalizing faith identity and conviction in each of these girls' cases. Juxtaposing these two girls' experiences exposes that those students who already enjoy the rights and privileges of society do so at the expense of those youth who are denied and deprived those same rights and privileges because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and so forth.

Elaine offered a similar but more exasperated plea than Harmeet or Ashley, as a student who is Roman Catholic in name but embraces the concept of spirituality outside of Roman Catholicism more directly. Elaine identifies as a youth of mixed race who does not "fit anywhere. I fit with the other mixed people, but they're all different too." Elaine affords herself concessions in transcending race to find faith connections, or at best acceptance, with peers. She reflects on the important role her grandfather played in molding her identity in her younger years and chooses to be an active agent in defining her identity, as opposed to simply playing a victim. Ashley does not appear to have captured the same support mechanisms as Elaine in the form of empowerment through peers who share in her diversity or otherness. However, both students appeared to be aware of their spatial allocation in a transitional context: between representatives of a specific faith-based cultural context and being racialized spiritual agents in a representative space of global hybridization.

Both girls exhibit an injury of the spirit, much like Williams (1987, 1991) describes in relation to how one who is marginalized constantly battles within oneself the right to be accepted. The contradictions and complexity of these identities are constantly in motion and evolve daily in the lived experiences of these youth. Ashley and Elaine each use their knowledge of their Roman Catholicism to mask a true identity, but each girl also struggles to find a solid space of accepted freedom and liberation from colonial and societal expectation and conformity. For youth to portray an identity that is 'religious,' they must impart the illusion of "fitting in" with a mask of imposed faith. As diversified as the schools are across the Toronto CMA, the delivery of knowledge and experience needs to start with the self through identifying one's place and space in the spectrum of privilege to oppression. Roman Catholic schools and school communities have a strong battle toward overcoming their own perceived history and modern vision of what the Church represents and continues to offer. For modern Roman Catholic school youth, their identity shifts behind masks of expected gender, race and faith dimensions. These masks provide the illusion of acceptance between home, school, community and church, without offering the freedom of a true spiritual identity.

### **Communities in Faith: Current and Future Challenges for the Roman Catholic School System of Ontario**

From the research presented here, statistically one-third of all students today in Roman Catholic secondary schools across the Toronto CMA are non-Roman Catholic. Within that one-third of non-Roman Catholic students, one-tenth further aligns themselves with a non-Christian religious or spiritual identity. This level of diversity reflects the reality of modern Ontario Roman Catholic schools across the Toronto CMA, and is noted by previous demographic research (Ornstein, 2006; Strategic Research Statistics, 2005; White, Leake, & Hunter, 2005). The students immersed in the schools themselves note the level of diversity. Tiffany, an initially reserved Grade 9 student, observed that “up to 50%” of the students in her school are possibly not Roman Catholic, noting a distinct Muslim population, while Randy presented that “possibly only 45% of the students at his school are Catholic,” with a diverse range of Christian and Sikh students making up the majority. Randy’s school (which also enrolls Marion and Elisa) had the largest return rate for students with 14 of 30 surveys returned. Of these 14 randomly selected students, nine were Roman Catholic, two were Sikh, one was Adventist, one was Pentecostal, and one was Muslim. The myth of only Roman Catholics attending modern Ontario Roman Catholic secondary schools, as well as the stereotype of those Roman Catholics being white and of European ancestry, is perpetuated to the detriment of rejoicing in the diversity that “adds a certain richness to our schools” according to Mr. Sullivan, a 29-year veteran of the Ontario Roman Catholic school system.

Some students internalize empowerment by being enrolled in the Roman Catholic system, yet others transcribe the experience with a stricter lens of critique. Randy was quick to suggest that his school “teaches us to be tolerant” as opposed to “accepting,” and this in turn incites resistance by students. He insists that there is less need of ritual and routine to inspire a religious or spiritual identity that is empowered and free. Mr. Campbell echoed Randy’s sentiment. As a 31-year veteran Roman Catholic educator, Mr. Campbell offered that modern Roman Catholic curriculum disengages youth who want to sincerely embrace a positive faith or spiritual identity. Religious content in school classrooms is dictated through the current voice of the Church, and this qualifies a resistance in some youth toward participating in class discussion or learning about religious concepts in general.

Youth, however, do offer hope that Roman Catholic school communities are spaces that can empower identity and faith or spiritual development. Frey, Pedrotti, Edwards, and McDermott’s (2004) study on self-efficacy and life scheme provides insight into Roman Catholic school youth in the United States who do show strength in an identity that is positive and a faith identity that is empowering. The Roman Catholic school experience in this study suggests that immersion in a religious environment provides incentive to embrace an identity that is accepted by a community in faith, a community with similar goals and directions. Yet, just as the Institute for Catholic Education (ICE) (2007) report spoke for the voices of known non-Roman Catholic youth in today’s Ontario system, Frey et al.’s (2004) quantitative study does not offer the perspective of the non-Roman Catholic voice within its results.

Mr. Domitrovich offers, “As a system founded on exclusion and assimilation, one can argue for the need to move away from the labels, titles and historical connotation within the prescribed system as we know it.” With students commenting that taking Communion is seen as a “chore,” religion classes are “redundant and repetitive with little spiritual depth,” and the retreat experience provides little meaning because “people don’t know why they’re going ... it is just a religion class trip,” the Roman Catholic schooling experience currently fails to inspire faith identity for some youth. On the real issues that affect the community, such as teenage pregnancy, sexual diseases, racism, gang violence, physical health, and life choices in society, again I refer to Marian who poignantly suggested: “I think we’re kind of



killing our community by not educating them!” The Roman Catholic Church, caught up in dictating conservative principles, is in turn ignoring the reality of the liberalism that is taking hold of its communities. Mr. Sullivan reveals that he “has never had an issue with a kid resisting religion class who are non-Catholic kids. The few that I’ve had resisting are in fact Catholic kids.” Indeed, five of the seven students who admitted to not practicing their faith on the survey, self-identified as being Roman Catholic.

The implication and usage of language in education needs to evolve toward an inclusive, liberationist, and anti-colonial form in the community that respects all religious identities. Both Groome (2002) and Murphy (2001) suggest that individual contributions to one’s society are important but it is the sociological offering of a community-of-persons that provides the global Roman Catholic community with the call to teach and to learn together as one. Youth need to be active participants in engaging their Roman Catholic school community in order to achieve a respect and appreciation for diversity in their religious beliefs and faith identity.

One could argue that community is the strongest positive elements of the Roman Catholic system, and the aspect that defines the system as unique. Just as ICE (1998) suggests, “The Christian vision regarding the value of the human person and his/her journey is passed on only through community” (p. 18). Yet, an inclusive community would not reflect the religious elitism that appears predominant in the Toronto CMA Roman Catholic schools that is noted by the youth within the system. Indeed, the Muslim and Sikh survey respondents identified that their faith is only talked about at holiday time, if at all. Roman Catholic secondary schools appear to be in a contradiction toward appreciating the “richness” of diversity, as Mr. Sullivan suggested, with people who make up their halls and the reality of not affording equal value or voice to those identities that sit outside the Roman Catholic expectations. The time has come to re-interpret the gospel through a spiritual lens of liberation that sits outside the confines of colonial Roman Catholicism. Opening Roman Catholic schools to diversity was the first step in a process of truly envisioning a community-of-persons-in-faith. Now comes the time for embracing that difference and valuing identity because of its diversity, as Mr. Sullivan suggests:

If Catholicism means here comes everybody, and you’re closing the doors to everybody, then are you really Catholic? I would maintain that we are in fact . . . more responsive to the Catholic call of inclusion than other schools. . . . My Christ, the Christ that I adhere to, would sit down at a bias-free table, with homosexuals, Muslims, people with disabilities, all those who are marginalized and not only would he sit down with them, he would call them to his table, he’d seek them out.

### **The Roman Catholic school system needs to take stock**

Mulligan’s (1990, 1994) work and the ICE (2007) report depict Ontario Roman Catholic school youth as struggling for acceptance in an increasingly secularized society. Youth are under continual pressure to conform to society’s materialistic individualism. Bibby’s (2001) ongoing research across Canada paints a picture of youth who are influenced by an increasingly technological and media-based world, yet who hold hope for the future through a sense of the spiritual. Over the last 20 years, youth have highlighted their main life concerns as pertaining to personal self-image, professional opportunities, and strength of alliances with family and peers. The data gathered during this research supports the work of Bibby, Mulligan, and ICE on these fronts.

However, this research contradicts Mulligan’s investigations and the ICE report where issues of faith and spiritual identity are concerned with youth. Mulligan’s work suggests that the interest and direction for today’s youth in claiming an identity in religious

faith or spirituality has eroded and become secularized, much like the society in which youth are growing and developing. However, the research data presented here aligns with Bibby's findings showing a convicted voice in today's youth that is interested in possessing and nurturing faith and faith identity. From the survey and interviews, students and parents offered that they regularly practice their religion, faith, or spirituality, either through church attendance, prayer, or personal/public retreat/reflection 85% of the time. Modern youth voice consistently positive references to their interpretation and internalization of faith and faith identity, albeit not necessarily within the context of any particular religion, but often as a unique and personal conviction. The work of Mulligan and ICE are correct in diagnosing Roman Catholic school youth's disinterest in the Roman Catholic religion, but are not accurate in projecting that this denominational disinterest is caused by youth's movement toward secularism. Modern youth desire a more holistic form of faith that is more spiritual in nature.

Institutional education, as we currently know it, is fraught with inaccuracies embedded in curriculum materials, pedagogical relations, and assumptions about communities. Multiculturalist discourses and the desire for inclusiveness produce a theory that suggests that if one has logical knowledge of the Other's culture, then one can know how to accommodate them, join them, or stay away from them. When conceptualization of what it means to know cultures is made rigid in this way, it is stripped of ambivalence or questions and yet, as we have seen through this research, the ways individuals see themselves in relation to their religious and cultural representations are full of ambivalence, questions, and conflicts. Public education is being eroded because it is not meeting the needs of a new Canada.

The youth interviewed in this research described their Roman Catholic school experience as "disciplined," "safer," or "good," asserting that it inspired them to be "better Christians" and exposed them to issues of "social justice, poverty, and oppression" that they otherwise might not have appreciated. Yet, a language reflecting a religious literacy is void. Modern youth desire to connect their education and their learning with their lived experience, histories, and identities. Modern youth adopt the language of the time that has evolved beyond a religious literacy basked in colonial dictation and rigidity. Youth are demanding a more realistic and sophisticated language to properly name their experiences, determining whom it is they wish to be and how they wish to be seen. Without discussing socially relevant topics such as racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, gender, or faith-based discrimination through a lens of self-reflexivity, the Roman Catholic educational system is depriving students knowledge and understanding of the myriad of ways in which humans express themselves. Roman Catholic schools, in order to adapt within an increasingly secular and individualist public agenda, are tightening the colonial directive toward dictating an inflexible and paternal agenda of supremacy. Yet the attitude of nurturing a blind Roman Catholic worldview appears prevalently detrimental to the system, depriving the youth within school corridors.

In much the same way as Elaine referred to "self-esteem" as fundamental for youth in order to nurture a healthy spiritual identity, this research posits that it is the place of Roman Catholic schools and educators to help students to nurture that identity. One could argue that it needs to happen through the voice of teachers. Youth, however, identify themselves as being at a crossroads toward achieving a desired identity and trusting the words of their teachers toward guided understanding of how that identity fits with the larger community. It is educators' role to foster the positive alliance with community, community elders, and family that is critical to support and facilitate learning for youth. Today's youth need role models who will inspire life-long learning in faith development, in an effort to embrace a valued self-identity within a community-of-persons. Randy stated, as a matter of fact, that the

success of Roman Catholic education falls onto the teachers to practice, model, and believe in Roman Catholicism as a way of life. Classroom teachers engaging youth every day need to embrace their faith in a manner that is inclusively respectful, sincere, and spiritually driven. Pedagogy in this case is framed by theology within a denominationally specific environment. But how will youth embody self-esteem and adopt life-long learning and faith development strategies when they are immersed in a system that devalues difference and applauds silence?

### **Reflections on the Spirit**

As Anderson (1989) suggests:

A persistent criticism of educational critical theory is its tendency toward social critique without developing a theory of action that educational practitioners can draw upon to develop a “counter-hegemonic” practice in which dominant structures of classroom and organizational meaning are challenged. (p. 257)

As educators, it becomes extremely important to listen to the voices of our clients. Roman Catholic theologians, educators, and researchers need to listen to students’ choice of words and the context of their directional emotion, as they are being served to deliver “what people want, rather than what we think they want” (Shahjahan 2005, p. 689). Youth react and respond to the dialogue of immersion and context of power invoked from the dialogue. For the community to place parameters around an identity that is deemed unacceptable or warranting concern only implies supremacy and control on the part of the community.

As members of an age in which religious and spiritual epistemologies and ontologies are interwoven within all aspects of society, it becomes necessary to regard the salient voices of those searching for a respected and valued identity in faith that exist among and within us. There is very limited space in the global arena in which no form of religion or spirituality is at play. Therefore, to educate youth and to awaken an awareness and appreciation for the diverse forms in which people interpret the world will benefit the creation of a global community of persons, a global community of hope, and a global community of peace. Just as Parpart (1995, p. 17) qualifies that post-modernist thinkers reject universal, simplified definitions of social phenomena because such definitions essentialize reality and fail to reveal the complexity of life as a lived experience, educational theorists and theological educators need to provide an equitable space for all in their midst. Dei (2000, p. 45) calls for new and alternative ways to acknowledge the history, loyalty, commitment, and interdependence among peoples within and between communities as lived, valued, and empowered forms of knowledge. In turn, it is the identity of peoples that affect lived experience and shape how we create and acknowledge ourselves. Spirituality is an integral part of the self, personhood, and collective identity. Liberating the spirit and finding identity outside the shackles of oppression, marginalization, or discrimination for all youth, Roman Catholic or non-Roman Catholic, embraces the progressive directive of growing as a global community-in-persons. Spiritual knowing embraces difference, respects lived knowledges and experience-strengthening alliances within communities, and inspires interaction that is free, liberating and, empowering.

For youth to support and promote an identity through learning, spiritual knowledge must be acknowledged as socially constructed and acknowledged to change as new knowledges and understandings are generated (Dei, 2000, pp. 82-83). The development of a self-reflective spiritual conscience can also help students understand the relationship between the self and the community. Teachers need to incorporate a language for faith development that is holistic and nurturing of the self as an equal and integrated part of the whole of

community in order to present students with the opportunity to develop such a faith. As Dei (2000) further suggests, “Developing a sense of community is the cornerstone for effective teaching and learning to promote change” (p. 52). Re-centering the curriculum through the words of Groome (2002), Murphy (2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) and Mulligan (1990, 1994, 2005) could renegotiate spiritual knowledge as a valid and real way of knowing oneself within a community of indigenous, diasporic, and diverse peoples. Re-centering the curriculum through the words of Cone (1969), Gutiérrez (2004), and Haight (1985) on the diverse visions of liberation could bring a lens of anti-oppression ideals and dialogue that would strengthen the Ontario Roman Catholic community as it rebuilds its sense of self. The restructuring of the Roman Catholic school system to embrace and actively put in motion a philosophy of family/home-based prior learning and community education will anchor a broader definition of education that encompasses an emotional and spiritual dimension, parental and community advocacy, and youth empowerment.

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