CONSOLATION AND HOPE IN A TIME OF CRISIS: BRINGING CHAPLAINS TOGETHER TO CULTIVATE HUMAN FLOURISHING AND SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-RELATED LOSSES FOR YEAR 7 PUPILS

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BRIEFING PAPER

DR. ANN CASSON
MS. ANN PITTAWAY
PROF. BOB BOWIE

Canterbury
Christ Church
University

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Consolation and hope in a time of crisis: bringing chaplains together to cultivate human flourishing and spiritual resilience in response to covid-related losses for Year 7 pupils.

Consolation and hope in a time of crisis is a two-year funded qualitative research project (June 21-May 23) funded by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust. The study investigates how experienced chaplains in Church of England and Catholic schools can nurture spiritual resilience amongst Year 7 students during their induction year and help mitigate the consequences of different forms of loss and suffering encountered because of Covid-19.

The project created a virtual community of practice (VCoP) network of chaplains, supporting professionals in a critical area of work. Accompanying the nine VCoP meetings, the research team provide research digests that offer a framework for discussion based on current research. Transcripts of each VCoP are analysed using an adaptation of Carol Gilligan's I-Poem method[i] and findings regularly disseminated through briefing papers and termly webinars.

This research project focuses on the following spiritual and religious priorities to support and encourage:

- **Dialogue between the Christian faith and contemporary issues in a secular society.** Chaplaincy is a widely recognised role that often crosses religious and secular parameters. Although some schools do not always utilise the expertise of chaplains, schools may benefit from being differently resourced when faced with exceptional Covid-19 related challenges. We are hoping to capture a sense of the role and the experiences from chaplaincy in contemporary schooling in this time of national crisis.

- **Closer working relationships between Christian denominations.** This study brings together chaplains from different Christian denominations. We anticipate that we will identify both commonalities and distinctions in the different contexts and hope the research continues to enhance the body of insight across denominations for maximum insight and for building a common fruitful conversation between the denominational settings.

- **The innovative education and communication of Christianity within the UK and internationally.** The shared expertise from the VCoP will provide a forum for debate and an exchange of new ideas and practices for a wider audience of schools within the UK and internationally. We believe that capturing and disseminating insights from these professionals working in this specific area of spiritual flourishing in schools will enhance and support the priority of chaplaincy and the work they do with young people, especially those most impacted by the national emergency.

Research questions

1. How do experienced chaplains nurture the spiritual resilience of Year 7 students who have been affected by Covid-19 loss?

2. How do chaplains identify and evaluate best practices in developing spiritual resilience in their own and each other's practice?

3. To what extent does a virtual community of practice support school chaplains in their work in a time of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic?

The project is in the initial stages of inquiry and this briefing paper focusses on research question 1, drawing upon an initial analysis of the three 2021 VCoP sessions and consultation meetings with an advisory group of experts.

It is important to note that the initial findings will be refined or changed as the research progresses.

OUR INITIAL ANALYSIS OF THE PERIOD JUNE 2021-DECEMBER 2021 REVEALS

- Chaplains perceive a Year 7 cohort who are not at all secondary school ready, often with a distorted view of what it means to belong to secondary school.

- They are seeing an increase of anxiety and mental health issues amongst Year 7 students.

- Chaplains face challenges and changes in their role without procedures or protocols to fall back on.

- They are experiencing greater demand from the staff for chaplaincy support.

- Chaplains express a sense of hope and optimism as the community is rebuilt in a post-lockdown world.

THE IMPACT ON YEAR 7 STUDENTS

Each year the process of transition and induction from primary to secondary school raises a plethora of emotions connected with change and a sense of the unknown. While some children thrive on the sense of adventure this experience can provoke, others consider it a stressful time causing much angst. Regardless of how children encounter this change, it is a momentous rite of passage. Establishing a foundation for success throughout this process involves a network of support and guidance from various stakeholders. Evidence suggests a smooth transition process is critical for students' wellbeing, sense of connectedness and progression.

The pandemic has and continues to disrupt on an unprecedented global scale. Within UK education, students, staff, and parents have been required to change their approach to teaching and learning with the government enforced home-schooling, online learning, and school closures for most students[ii]. This intense pressure has particularly impacted those involved with student wellbeing. Many staff have gone above and beyond what is expected in the hope that the impact of Covid-19 is reduced[iii].

Children who were coming to the end of their primary education during 2020 experienced fragmented and broken transition procedures. Following a substantial time of pandemic-induced home-schooling, these same students entered a new secondary school environment where they encountered social distancing measures that kept them safe but restricted their access to the wider community. Hence, they were experiencing a significant transition period in their lives while simultaneously venturing into a new world, gradually emerging from isolation, and having to learn new ways of being community.

For further background information on this section, please refer to Research Digest Issue 1 and 2.

WHAT DID THE CHAPLAINS REPORT (ANALYSIS OF VCOPS 1-3)?

- **Year 7 cohorts (2020-21) who are not all secondary school ready.**

All the chaplains agreed that the Year 7 cohort generally showed a sense of immaturity.

> *It was as if they were waiting to start secondary school and that the transition and induction process had been put on hold.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

> *They're still a bit like primary kids.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

- **Lack of experience of what it means to belong to secondary school.**

The chaplains suggested that the bubble system employed in some of the schools had kept students closeted, so they did not experience the excitement and challenges of being part of the full secondary environment.

> *They haven't got that experience, that excitement, maybe even that little bit of fear of moving round a big school and going from room to room. They've been kept together for a long while in one room with teachers coming into them. They kind of haven't had that full experience and they haven't been interacting obviously with older years.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

> *I think because the environment has been so tightly controlled there's not that element of you've got to find your feet, and yes you are on your own, but it will get better, but you have to go out there and find your way around the building and make new friends.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

> *They're also missing out on the key changes of things like using science laboratories, perhaps they've had limited PE facilities as well, food tech., and computer suites and that sort of thing.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

- **An increase of anxiety and mental health issues amongst Year 7 students.**

The chaplains unanimously stated that mental health issues across the school and within the Year 7 cohorts had escalated. Issues that had tended to emerge among older students were now being brought to their attention in Year 7. Anxiety was witnessed in different ways. One chaplain said Year 7 students in his RE classes have '*talked quite a lot about adults not agreeing. They see politicians arguing; they're seeing people in power, behaving quite badly… that's pulled the foundations from under them.*'

> *What we've noticed in bucketloads is the mental health needs of the Year 7's has been on a different scale from previous years and we've noticed some really very complex needs around eating disorders, OCD, struggling to attend school at all and it's just hit us like a juggernaut really.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

Muddled anxiety was also mentioned. Students were coming in with issues that were not necessarily covid- related, but they thought Covid was to blame. Covid was being used as a blanket – blame for all issues. Furthermore, parents of Year 7 were contacting the school saying their children were anxious when a further investigation revealed the parents were anxious. There was an increased sense of displaced anxiety.

WHERE DID THE CHAPLAINS SEE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

> *Teams has become a good vehicle for contact…[some] students were more inclined via chats to ask questions…that maybe they wouldn't have done in the real world.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

Improved Communications: New skills with technology have helped with communication between staff, students, and parents; for example, one chaplain reported that with students and parents of Year 7, '*we've been on virtual pilgrimages.*'

Openness in talking about death
Some chaplains noticed conversations related to death have become less of a taboo amongst staff and students. Students seem to be more open to the value of prayer and reflection.

> *Talking about loss, talking about death and illness has become more of the vocabulary.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

> *Something that has really surprised me with our Year 7 students is how they've dealt with loss...they come into the chapel, they're lighting a candle on our remembrance tree and they're saying prayers and it's positive for want of a better term. They're not coming into the chapel in floods of tears, and I don't know what to do, it's like, "My nan passed away last Wednesday, and I'd just like to say a prayer." And sometimes they say prayers on their own and then they'll talk about happy memories, and they walk out of the chapel and say, "Thank you Sir." It's quite a positive experience.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 3)

A new approach to induction
The crisis has forced a rethinking of the process of induction. One chaplain hoped there had been '*a slightly better induction for our Year 7s in terms of the school ethos and sense of belonging to a community.*'

As part of the induction process and getting to know the school community, one school has been able to help Year 7s feel connected with the wider community linked to their school via virtual introductions. For instance, in this school, the convent of sisters and church community have been able to speak about their connection and experience of the school community using the medium of Microsoft Teams. This is something they will continue to do with future induction procedures.

Chaplains have a crucial role in helping students with induction into their new school. They can epitomise for students through such work, *I was a stranger, and you welcomed me* (Matthew 25:35).

> *Circumstances have forced us to think differently and probably better, and this is something we will keep in the future.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED THE INDUCTION OF THE MORE VULNERABLE YEAR 7 STUDENTS?

For more detailed information, please see Research Digest issues 1,2 and 3.

The most vulnerable in society have been disproportionally affected by the impact of Covid-19 magnifying current inequalities. We know that children should have access to resources that will "help overcome not just the 'attainment gap' but also the 'trauma gap' faced by vulnerable pupils."[iv] However, it could be that experiences of trauma and loss may not be expressed for a significant amount of time after the actual event. It should also be noted that many of the children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who did attend school during the lockdown flourished with smaller group sizes and increased support. (OFSTED, 2021).

The chaplains were concerned that due to increased pressures on their time dealing with students' complex mental health issues, their ability to spend time building relationships with vulnerable students has been affected.

> *I think just the volume of what some of these children are dealing with, because whether it's pandemic induced or whatever, there's so much going on at home and outside of school and that seems to have escalated, so any issues in school just seem to be on top of another load of issues. So, it's becoming a lot more complex.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

> *I'd say 3 out of our main 5 feeders are very deprived areas so quite a lot of the children we get have existing things that they worry about or that they're struggling with.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

> *I would say we are still seeing the vulnerable in more need.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

This project has a particular interest in vulnerable and disadvantaged students and how they have been affected by the pandemic. As the project progresses, we will continue to investigate this further.

HOW DO EXPERIENCED CHAPLAINS NURTURE THE SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE OF YEAR 7 STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY COVID-19 LOSS?

For further background information on this section, please refer to Research Digest Issue 3.

The working understanding of spiritual resilience for this research project is underpinned by the thinking of Masten[v], who states that an individual's resilience is 'embedded in relationships and social systems.'

In the context of this study, spiritual resilience refers to helping students nurture their sense of self and purpose while encountering adversity. Spiritual resilience is rooted in connections, in meaningful relationships with other nurturing and competent adults rooted in spirituality, faith, and hope.

Even though the research is focusing on the role of chaplaincy, it is also essential at this stage to point out that nurturing a sense of resilience cannot be confined to any individual or team; it is a whole-school responsibility that permeates the life of the community.

> *In terms of spiritual resilience, we're trying to sort of make a distinction between spiritual resilience and any [other] kind of resilience. I think that's referring even more to that inner sense of who I am and what my worth is.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 3)

> *I think we're at a stage [Dec 2021] where we're seeing much more of the total meltdown and inability to go any further. When there's a slight hiccup along the way, it's treated like an almighty disaster. So yes, I think that sort of spiritual resilience is an essential starting point really, yes.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 3)

> *I do wonder what role models our young people are seeing when it comes to resilience. Are they seeing politicians, celebrities having meltdowns, making a mess-up, doing things very wrongly? Where are those solid stable role models? …In which case that's where faith comes in as the solid, you can rely on this, this is there.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

The chaplains reported that nurturing spiritual resilience was critical and emphasises the necessary focus on the role of faith.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SCHOOL CHAPLAINS

The current pandemic has affected the chaplain's role in many ways, presenting them both with challenges and innovative ideas for moving forward with hope. Creating and fostering an environment where a climate of hope exists and relationships can develop, built on trust, underpin a chaplain's role. However, chaplains have faced many challenges during 2020-2021. Among other things, they have:

- Transferred many of their activities and interactions online.
- Created new and interactive ways of engaging the school community in acts of worship.
- Responded to the increase of students presenting with pastoral and mental health concerns.
- Provided support for the escalating anxiety amongst the staff population.
- At times, struggled to attend to and sustain their own wellbeing and spiritual resilience.

> *I am having to get stricter with standing back and saying, 'no' as everything is so overwhelming, and I need to protect my own wellbeing.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 3)

From pastoral to triage service:
The complexity of mental health issues that chaplains must contend with means they function as triage services. The chaplain's time is stretched with increased severity of mental health concerns in an increasing number of Year 7 pupils. Spending so much time dealing with pastoral and mental health issues has meant the role of chaplaincy at times, *'has felt really quite depressing because you're missing the joy bits.'*

> *Whereas previously with pastoral care I engaged with the student, and I would meet them after, and build up a relationship and support them…I'm not tending to have such satisfying and fulfilling pastoral encounters. I'm seeing someone, I do a referral and off they go.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

Lack of communal worship: A lack of collective worship experience and time in sacred spaces such as churches also affects the chaplains' ability to offer opportunities for pupils to experience religious practice. There will need to be a period of reflection post-lockdown; *'how are people feeling about God…their relationships... in terms of a school community of worship. What's that going to mean?'*

> *As a school community we haven't gathered together even as partial groups for a couple of years. They, [Year 7] haven't actually had that experience, so no singing and all those sorts of things.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

Need to re-establish and re-invent processes: Some chaplains suggested that they need to repeat CPD work on planning and delivering worship. This was reinforced with further comments that only current year 10 [2021] and above in secondary school know what pre-covid life was like in this context.

> *[For Year 7s] their sense of time means that church is now something they did in the past. Chaplain*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

> *I think it's the biggest challenge I've ever seen in this or any other school. … to be honest I just feel like I've got to do all 4 years all over again. We relaunched our mission statement, we did loads of staff CPD on planning and delivering effective worships, we've got student form prayer, all that stuff and they'll have forgotten everything.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 1)

A SENSE OF HOPE GOING FORWARD

Enhanced online worship: Chaplains agreed that their resources for worship during the pandemic had become far more enriched and meaningful. They had to think differently and become more creative. Students and other school community members have been contributing more to online worship. Some chaplains have maintained a weekly virtual assembly despite resuming face-to-face contact with students.

One chaplain included a daily worship PowerPoint on the school's homework system. It was made clear that this was a voluntary activity and daily school worship was there each day if the students wished to access it. The feedback demonstrated that students were not only accessing it, but they were doing so with their families.

More student and staff engagement: Following the return of the whole school community, chaplains found that both students and staff were keen to engage in times of reflection and prayer. They have found that more than ever, staff and students are making use of the chaplaincy space in the school for quiet reflection and prayer.

> *I was able to do a workshop on prayer and collective worship as part of the training… to introduce a short time of meditation as part of the prayer, a stillness exercise and a minute's silence… loads of people said to me either ''Oh yes, I already do this'', or ''That's really good, I think I'm going to do it myself.''*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

Rebuilding of community

Through the life of a community, we are nourished and supported to flourish as human beings. Connection to a community helps identify who we are and shapes our becoming. Meeting and walking with each other in times of adversity while building firm foundations anchored in trust, empathy, and dignity fosters a community that can flourish together. For this reason, despite a challenging role throughout the pandemic, the chaplains maintained a sense of hope and optimism for rebuilding their school community post lockdown.

> *I think amongst those of us who are leading assemblies and/or worship there is a real thirst for it. So, I think those of us leading are going to be putting that much more care into it, that much more of ourselves.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

> *I think the quality of our online stuff was really good but actually being shoulder to shoulder with somebody is something quite different so I'm hoping that will be something that will come back as the heart of our community, I think.*
>
> Chaplain, (VCoP 2)

CONCLUSION

As with any research, the initial findings raise more questions than answers. At this early stage, it is clear from this evidence that chaplains provide an insight into the experience of schools that crosses wellbeing and spiritual dimensions. They also see the educational challenges of the present crisis, as well as the challenges to the individual and community spirit of the school. Their perspective crosses multiple boundaries within the school and within an understanding of what happens in and around school.

The evidence also identifies issues that affect chaplains' ability to nurture spiritual resilience

- Year 7 pupils are, in general, less resilient and immature. They have been in a more protected environment in secondary school than they usually face in their first year.
- Mental health problems have increased amongst students because of the pandemic.
- There are significant challenges in developing positive relationships and engendering a sense of bonding to the school community. For example, a lack of pastoral time with vulnerable children as the chaplain's function as triage service.
- Engendering a sense of community through spiritual and religious practices has been negatively impacted by the lack of opportunities for in-person communal worship. This lack of collective worship experience and time in sacred spaces such as churches also affects chaplains' ability to offer opportunities for pupils to experience religious practice.

There is among chaplains, hopes for nurturing spiritual resilience

- Online worship has offered a positive engagement for many students. Hence, there is the intention to continue with this into the future.
- The chaplains are once again welcoming pupils back into chaplaincy spaces.
- They are beginning to restart communal worship and are bringing pupils back into the church buildings where appropriate.
- There is a strong focus on building back a sense of community.

Next Steps for the Research Project

The initial phase of our investigation considered the experiences and reflections of chaplains and Year 7 induction students during the academic year 2020-2021. Moving forward, we will be:

- Focusing particularly on the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable and disadvantaged Year 7 induction students.
- Creating, with the chaplains, a CPD toolkit on spiritual resilience to be disseminated to a wider audience, including schools without chaplaincy support.
- Evaluating to what extent a virtual community of practice supports school chaplains in their work in a time of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

ENDNOTES

i   Gilligan, C., & Eddy, J. (2017). Listening as a path to psychological discovery: an introduction to the Listening Guide. *Perspectives on medical education*, 6(2), 76.

ii   Crisis activated remote education during the spring and summer terms 2020 became the substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning, and the home environment replaced the classroom. In the return to school the environment was still far removed from the pre-pandemic context. Social distancing measures meant the fragmentation of whole school community experiences with the bubble system becoming commonplace. The opportunities and challenges generated by the pandemic continue to invade the education sector. The road to recovery for education is tentative as the impact of the pandemic on learning loss and pastoral care is still very much unknown.

iii   Howard, E., Aneesa Khan, A., and Lockyer, C., (July 2021). *Learning during the pandemic: review of research from England.* Accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-during-the-pandemic/learning-during-the-pandemic-review-of-research-from-england on 04/01/2022.

iv   Barnardo's (2020) *Coronavirus must lead to positive change in the school system.* Accessed via https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/coronavirus-must-lead-positive-change-school-system-barnardos-says (barnardos.org.uk) on 09/05/2021.

v   Masten, A.S. (2014). *Ordinary Magic Resilience in Development.* Guilford Publications: New York

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