



Canterbury
Christ Church
University

I-Poems



Voices from the Heart:

**Listening to school chaplains concerning
their role in supporting students during the
Covid-19 pandemic**

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The National Institute for Christian Education Research

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Introduction

Consolation and hope in a time of crisis

This research project (2021-23) investigated how chaplains from Catholic and Church of England secondary schools nurtured a sense of hope and resilience amongst year 7 students during their induction year, especially those who found themselves transitioning to their new school during the height of the pandemic disruption (for further information see nicer.org.uk).

It was a qualitative investigation that brought together chaplains in nine virtual community of practice (VCOP) meetings, enabling a shared collaboration of expertise and knowledge where the chaplains were able to learn from each other, listen to each other and support each other.

A vital part of the data analysis was to apply a qualitative method developed initially by Brown, Gilligan, and colleagues (1992)¹ in the context of feminist studies, the 'I Poem' approach. This method is structured to bring often overlooked or hidden voices of expression to the fore. We used this to reach beyond the voices of professionalism and institutional expectations. Applying this method helped to reveal the personal and the often-missed voices underlying the surface comments of individual chaplains as they worked through the crisis, being the prophetic voice of care and compassion. The I-poems were shared with the participant chaplains to mitigate researcher bias and ensure they accurately reflect the chaplains' experience.

The I-poems derived from the school chaplains' input revealed the depth of theological reflection, the sense of personal despair and heartfelt expressions of compassion in the form of empathy, motivation to action, and service to the community.

Chaplains' Reflections on the I-Poems

It's such an innovative way to present feedback that reflects the personal engagement of the Chaplains, as they really do give of themselves in their work.
(Feedback from Webinar 5, May 2023)

You have captured the heart of what I was trying to say.
(Chaplain, April 2023)

The 'I poems' seem completely relevant to different experiences - for some, it might be about missed learning, for some, the adults and for others, more the children, but it all comes back to 'how am I managing?'
(Chaplain, March 2023)

Reading the I- Poems in Context

The I-poems within this booklet are accompanied by some context of what was happening at the time when each chaplain's voice was recorded and transcribed. This allows you, as the reader, to gain a wider appreciation and understanding of the heartfelt inner voice of the chaplain.

1 Brown, L. and Gilligan, C. (1992). Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674731837>

I-poems in context

December 2021: The Omicron variant of COVID-19 meant many schools in the UK closed early, before the end of the Christmas term. They were also preparing for online teaching in January 2022.

Schools were dealing with:

1. Social distancing measures were in place
2. A shortage of staff
3. School refusers
4. Heightened mental health issues.

Poem 1

I am pushing people away
I'm exhausted
I'm not coping
I would normally cope
I'm just so exhausted
I'm not really carrying
I'm dropping
I know that emotionally
I've kind of gone
I hope
I feel
I don't feel so well connected
I think that's a time-issue.

Poem 2

I'm going to say tired, but hopeful.
I suppose we've got used to it.
I can only speak for myself.
I think perhaps we're all the same.
I kind of went into this with fighting spirit.
I suppose I feel
I've got to deliver even more.
I'm starting to feel
I am the only one here.

I-poems in context

September 2022: School transitions are smoother this year than the previous two years.

The impact of COVID- 19 is still experienced:

1. Increase in mental health issues
2. School refusers
3. Friendship and behaviour issues increasing amongst students
4. Separation anxiety amongst students
5. Curriculum recovery pressure.

Poem 3

I'm frustrated.

I don't know if that's perhaps something
others are experiencing.

I do think there's a significant role for chaplains to inhabit
the ministry of presence.

I mean it comes down to your personal capacity to
communicate with others.

I don't mean just verbal communication.

I mean your being, the way in which you engage, your presence.

I think there needs to be something that a chaplain
can communicate.

I think that's part of our calling as chaplains.

Poem 4

I can do
I can contribute to the school community.
I do feel that in terms of the academic programme
we're right back at it.
I suppose then from a glimmer of hope is that now we can have
whole school liturgies together.
I think all of those things in their own way create space.
I like the idea of lamenting.
I don't think we have done that as a school community.

Poem 5

I'm out every breaktime talking to students around the school,
I'm not just in one place.
I think it is something that's come out of last year.
I think there's been a real focus on chaplaincy as the place to go
regarding bereavement.
I see it as our refuge where we can come,
where we can remember,
where we can talk about the people we've lost.

I-poems in context

December 2022: Schools continue to face the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic even though it is no longer required for young people and children to be tested for Covid-19 unless directed by health professionals.

- Even if children are not anxious, there continues to be a parental anxiety in some families resulting in them refusing to send their children to school.
- More than usual, students are finding it hard to sustain positive relationships and resolve friendship issues without adult intervention.
- There is a general sense of increased student vulnerability.

Poem 6

I would say that we have to realise that we can't just go
straight to addressing the academic
I think social isolation is real.
I think schools could be much more focused on rebuilding the
people, the human beings.
I think a lot of our staff were quite ignorant of that.
I guess there is so much need, and we know that.
I think that's the feeling in school.
I'd certainly say the language of panic attacks
is much more common.
I'm just thinking, just listening to people.

Poem 7

I think I've been just trying to digest things really,
I'm just doing too much,
I can't keep going at this pace and do stuff.
I think I'm feeling quite aware of my limits which is a new learning
curve for me.
I think that self-preservation is important.
I spoke to SLT.
I talked about vulnerability and leadership and self-compassion.
I think physician heal thyself is really where I'm at.

Poem 8

I wonder whether students feel more vulnerable now.
I don't know.
I'm thinking on my feet here,
I just wonder whether students suddenly feel more vulnerable.
"I'm having a meltdown" Yep, hear it every day.
I'd go as far to say with adults as well.
I think people are stretched and are much more emotional.
I think during the height of the pandemic we were saying to children,
"Normal is, be very wary of everyone. Everyone is a potential threat."
I thought I was invincible.
I learnt that I'm not.

Poem 9

I would ask, if we did it again, have I got the energy?
I think we all went in ready to go into battle and we all started
to flag quite quickly.
I've learnt the real value of prayer and if you do nothing else, pray.



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