

Lessons from COVID-19: The school chaplains' perspective

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Keywords: School chaplaincy, COVID-19, faith-based education

Abstract

This article aims to contribute to the literature relating to school chaplaincy during the COVID-19 pandemic. It adopts an Australian faith-based education system case study to explore school chaplains' insights of their roles, interactions with staff and students, as well as their perceptions of professional development and support available during the January 2020-December 2021 pandemic period. This research explored both quantitative and qualitative survey data. The role of school chaplains was found to be significantly impacted during COVID-19, affecting the nature of the support they provided to students, staff, and the school community during this time. A number of findings are presented for consideration that may help to improve school chaplaincy support, with learnings for both school chaplain leaders and the broader faith-based education system.

Introduction

School chaplains contribute to the values development of school students and are uniquely placed to respond to the social, emotional, spiritual, and pastoral needs of students, parents, staff and the school community. Consequently, literature identifies that school chaplaincy is "an understudied, yet very important and controversial" area (Isaacs & Mergler, 2018).

School chaplains operate within the contexts

of a school environment – an environment that experienced unprecedented disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, every Australian state and territory was subject to school closures across the K-12 educational setting, over varying time periods across the different states and territories, owing to the different Public Health Acts in place. For example, Sacks et al. (2020) reported that in early May of 2020, only 3% of children in Victorian government schools physically attended, while in NSW government schools, 'learning from home' continued for two months for many students (Gore, et al., 2021). In early 2020, with state and federal governments urging families to keep children at home, a "swift and dramatic shift from face-to-face learning to flexible and remote delivery of education" took place, with schools and teachers required to implement online learning in a matter of days (Gore et al., 2021, p. 606).

Such dramatic changes to schooling also impacted school chaplains, who continued to provide pastoral care for students, staff and families throughout this time. It is clear that the young people with whom these school chaplains work have been negatively impacted during the pandemic years, with students reporting increased feelings of social isolation, loneliness, frustration, confusion, and anxiety, regardless of demographics (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Mission Australia, 2020). Whilst the pandemic has been quite unique in the extent of social disruption, in recent times Australia has also experienced bush fires, flooding and economic cost of living concerns – issues that are not lost on our young people, and in many instances by extension, school chaplains.

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This study explores the role of the school chaplain within the faith-based Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) (2022) education system, during the COVID-19 period. Adventist Education represents the largest protestant schooling system in the world with over 8,500 institutions in over 100 countries educating nearly 2 million students each year. In the Australian context, 48 schools and 13 early learning services are providing Christian education to nearly 17,000 students representing the range of demographics found within Australian society. Purpose, Vision and Mission are important to Adventist Education in Australia, with the mission of Adventist education specifically “to inspire and care holistically for each individual person – equipping them with the beliefs, values and skills to live a life of purpose, hope, joy, and peace” (Adventist Schools Australia, 2022).

Importantly, there is a distinction to be made between the role of school chaplains in this faith-based education system, and school chaplains in many other school contexts within Australia. While the National Schools Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) states that NSCP chaplains “do not provide religious instruction or religious counselling” and “must not proselytise” in their role working with school communities (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), school chaplains within the faith-based education system of Adventist Schools Australia are enabled to engage with students in all aspects of their religious life, being integral to their educational experience.

Literature review

Research exploring school chaplaincy is relatively scarce. Ryan, (2015) states that “there remains a lack of accessible public research on what chaplains are, what they do and why (if at all) their roles matter” (p. 9). There have been very few studies exploring the views and values-based nature of school chaplaincy in Australia (Isaacs & Mergler, 2018).

Much controversy has existed around school chaplaincy over the last decade, receiving extensive media coverage in Australia. While questions regarding the effectiveness of school chaplaincy programs for student welfare and the funding of resources for chaplaincy compared to other support services has been debated, specifically in the context of the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP), the key focus of the disagreement regarding the role of school chaplains relates to “the blurring of line between religious activity and welfare support” (Mackenzie & Thielking, 2011, para. 8).

Under Prime Minister John Howard, the Australian Federal government established

the NSCP (Howard, 2006), stating “A chaplain might support ... in a range of ways, such as assisting students in exploring their spirituality; providing guidance on religious, values and ethical matters; helping school counsellors and staff in offering welfare services and support in cases of bereavement, family breakdown or other crisis and loss situations” (para. 4). Even after High Court challenges by Williams (Rule of Law, 2020) successive governments supported NSCP through the Department of Education (DET), including being administered under the National School Chaplaincy Association (NSCA). A current goal of the NSCA is to “support the wellbeing of students and communities through pastoral care services and student support strategies” (DET, 2022, para. 1), but clarifies relationships to religion and faith-based chaplain backgrounds in FAQs (NSCA, n.d.). Significant financial resources have been poured into the NSCP. Between 2006 and 2011 an estimated \$437 million was spent on the program, and more recently, a four-year agreement with the states and territories in 2019 was signed to spend \$245.7 million on school chaplains, with additional funding provided in 2020 to support school communities that were impacted by the 2019/2020 bushfires. In 2021 there were calls to extend school chaplaincy to help young students through the COVID-19 pandemic (Crowe, 2021).

In a national study commissioned in 2009 by the NSCA, the contributions of school chaplains to school welfare were identified, specifically their accessibility to students, a proactive approach to building relationships, their lack of involvement with the school discipline system, flexibility of role in meeting the needs of the school, addressing the welfare of the school community in a holistic way, bringing a specific set of values to their roles, and including a network of support from local churches (Hughes & Sims, 2009). This was a large scale, national study of the effectiveness of chaplaincy in government schools, registering response rates of 42% for principals completing the survey (688 out of 1626), and 74% of chaplains (1031 out of 1396). A number of interesting findings emerged from this study, including how chaplains spend their time (30% informal or structured pastoral care of students, and 9% in pastoral care of families and staff), the issues chaplains deal with (most frequently behaviour management and social relationship issues, such as anger, peer relationships, loneliness and bullying, but also issues relating to the development of the self, such as sense of purpose, self-esteem and mental health, issues relating to the involvement of students in the community, such as social inclusion and racism),

and the effectiveness of chaplains (Principals rated chaplaincy effectiveness for encouraging moral values and responsibility as 8.1/10, while Chaplains rated this 7.6/10). When asked about the most important contribution chaplains made, the most frequently mentioned response by both principals (42%) and chaplains (55%) was their provision of pastoral care in a non-judgmental way.

An independent evaluation of the NSCP was undertaken in Australian Government, Catholic and Independent schools in 2016-2017 (DET, 2018). This evaluation found that awareness of the school chaplain was high amongst the students surveyed (87%). Twenty five percent of students reported having a large amount of contact with the chaplain in the past year, 28% reported medium levels of contact, while 24% reported low levels of contact and 21% reported having no contact with school chaplains. Of note, actual reported individual engagement with the school chaplain by students (46%) was higher than school principal perceived student contact (30%) - although it was acknowledged that higher reported individual engagement amongst students may have been in informal contexts such as at recess or during school activities. The main advantages of having access to a school chaplain, as identified in this study, included having an accessible figure for them to talk to or confide in (24% of students), having someone who can provide them help and support with problems (22% of students), and having someone to provide assistance to help students understand or 'figure things out' (13% of students). Additionally, 13% also reported the benefit of being encouraged in their faith, and for 11% of students the program provided someone they could trust talking to other than a teacher or parent. Both staff and school principals experienced high levels of satisfaction with the programme, with 85% of principals and 81% of teachers considered to be extremely satisfied with the services and activities delivered in their school. The evaluation report stated the NCSP was "delivering on its objectives of supporting the emotional wellbeing of students and the broader school community" (DET, 2018, p. 6). The NSCP Snapshot (2021) reports that school chaplains "have 15,724 formal pastoral conversations with students per week" and "30,805 informal conversations with students" (p. 1) every week across Australia, with conversations involving topics such as relationships, friendship or peer concerns, school behaviour, mental health, bullying and harassment, and family breakdown or parental separation.

Martin, et al. (2020), reflecting on the NSCP, posit that "there is still a distinct lack of evidence as to whether the chaplaincy program is effectively

supporting children and young people's well-being" (para. 11). Scripture Union Australia and Generate, two organisations providing chaplains to more than 1300 schools across Australia, believe school chaplains have proven their worth (Crooks, 2022). A Scripture Union spokesperson identified the work of chaplains in early intervention and prevention of issues, as well as promoting positive behaviours, stating "Chaplains do this through one-to-one support to help young people find a better way to manage issues ranging from bullying, friendships, family breakdown, mental health, substance abuse and more" (Crooks, 2022, para 7.). A large part of doing this effectively, as identified by one school chaplain, is through established relationships (Powell, 2020). However, given some of the issues students raise, the question has been asked of whether psychologists may be better placed to help address some of the complex personal issues, psychological issues and those related to self-harm and suicide, while recognising the additional cost associated with hiring these professionals.

Other independent studies have explored aspects of school chaplaincy in the Australian setting. Pohlmann (2010) explored the nature and effectiveness of chaplaincy services in Queensland state schools, with findings including that state school chaplaincy can be highly effective, is highly contested in nature, is multi-faceted and demanding in nature, that strong initial and continuing education is needed, that considerable support is needed given the demanding work state school chaplains perform, that full-time chaplaincy is superior to part-time chaplaincy, and that state school chaplaincy services are particularly challenging in practice. This research found that "state school chaplaincy services were broadly regarded by school-based respondents as effective and worthwhile additions to the life of Queensland state schools" (Pohlmann, 2010, p. ii). Several areas for improvement were identified however, including setting goals for chaplaincy services and achieving them, having sufficient resources for the chaplaincy services to operate, the initial training and continuing professional development for chaplains, and the effect of finance and employment issues on chaplaincy services.

Research purpose and specific research questions

The data for this study was collected as part of a research project exploring the perceptions of school chaplains working within the faith-based education system, Adventist Schools Australia (ASA), during the COVID-19 impacted 2020 and 2021 school years.

“85% of principals and 81% of teachers ... extremely satisfied with the [chaplaincy] services and activities delivered”

- Informed by the literature reviewed, the study adopted four specific questions to direct the research:
1. How has COVID-19 impacted the role of ASA school chaplains?
 2. How has COVID-19 impacted the support offered to students and staff by ASA school chaplains?
 3. How has COVID-19 impacted the support offered to ASA school chaplains by the school and church communities?
 4. How has COVID-19 impacted the preparedness of ASA school chaplains to face situations such as this in the future?

Methodology

This study collected survey data, both qualitative and quantitative, relating to elements of the role of school chaplaincy, school chaplain interactions with students and staff, available professional development and perceived supports within the school chaplaincy role. The survey was prepared to fit the ASA school chaplaincy context, while including themes identified within the broader school chaplaincy literature, and then piloted to ensure its appropriateness in this context. The survey instrument consisted of sections exploring respondent demographics, school chaplains and students, school chaplains and staff, professional development and support, and the role of the school chaplain. The survey included both fixed choice questions including varied Likert scale responses (1 = High, 4 = Low) as well as open-ended responses for particular questions. Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18 years or older, and to have been employed as a chaplain within this faith-based education system for at least a part of the COVID-19 pandemic during January 2020-December 2021. Permission for the research was obtained from the national office of Adventist Schools Australia.

Emails were sent to 82 ASA school chaplains including a link to complete a survey via SurveyMonkey, an online-based survey application (SurveyMonkey, 2022). This online link was left open for a one-month time frame and participants were prompted multiple times to complete the survey. At the completion of the one-month (and three subsequent follow-up emails), 61 total responses were collected, representing a 74.4% response rate.

Findings
Sample

Of the 61 ASA school chaplains who responded to the survey, 43 completed the survey in full, and these fully completed responses form the data for this research. Of these, 69.8% were male, and 30.2% were female. Of the survey respondents,

Table 1: Demographic details of study respondents (N=43)

Measures	Number of Respondents (n)	Proportion of Respondents (%)
Gender		
Female	13	30.2
Male	30	69.8
Years of School Chaplaincy Experience		
1-3 years	11	25.6
4-6 years	14	32.5
7-10 years	7	16.3
10+ years	11	25.6
Location		
Urban/Metropolitan	34	79.1
Rural/Regional	9	20.9
Hours Worked Per Week		
Up to 15 hours	10	23.3
16-30 hours	12	27.9
31-45 hours	13	30.2
45+ hours	8	18.6

58.1% had been a chaplain for 6 years or less, and 41.9% for greater than 6 years. With regards to location, 79.1% of those who completed the survey described this as Urban/Metropolitan, and 20.9% described their location as Regional/Rural (Table 1). From those surveyed, 18.6% were employed in Primary school settings, 11.6% in Secondary school settings, and 69.8% were at schools with both a Primary and a Secondary campus. The majority of these school chaplains had qualifications in theology (53.49%) and about a tenth in education (9.30%), while others had qualifications in a broad range of areas including counselling, youth work and marketing, to name a few.

The role of the school chaplain

Role alignment

The school chaplains surveyed were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statement:

Chaplains are recognised as spiritual leaders in their school community, with a focus on Christian ministry to staff, students and their families.

It is noteworthy that only 53.49% of these school chaplain respondents indicated that they ‘strongly agree’ with this statement – a statement taken from an ASA school chaplain job description. A further 32.56% indicated they ‘agree’ with this

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statement, 11.63% 'somewhat agree' and 2.33% of school chaplain respondents indicated they 'disagree' with this.

Role rewards and satisfaction

These faith-based education system school chaplains were also asked how rewarding they find their role as a school chaplain. Encouragingly 62.79% found their role to be 'very rewarding', 30.23% indicated they found their role 'rewarding', 4.65% found it to be 'neither rewarding nor unrewarding', and 2.33% of school chaplain respondents found it to be 'unrewarding'. When asked to what extent they were satisfied that they were fulfilling the role of a school chaplain, 72.09% of school chaplain respondents indicated they were 'satisfied' in their fulfilment of the role, 16.28% were 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied', and 11.63% of school chaplain respondents indicated they were 'dissatisfied' with their personal assessment of their fulfillment of the role.

Role expansion and choice to continue

These school chaplains were asked if at any stage during the pandemic they extended beyond their usual role as a chaplain to provide support within their school community. 81.40% of respondents indicated 'yes', 6.98% indicated 'no', and 11.63% were 'unsure' if they had extended beyond their usual roles as school chaplains to provide support during the pandemic period being explored. Interestingly, these school chaplains were asked whether in the last two years, and related to COVID-19, whether they had at any time considered

a change in vocation; 41.86% of respondents indicated that they had considered a change in vocation, with the remaining 58.14% not considering a change in vocation during this time.

Stress levels

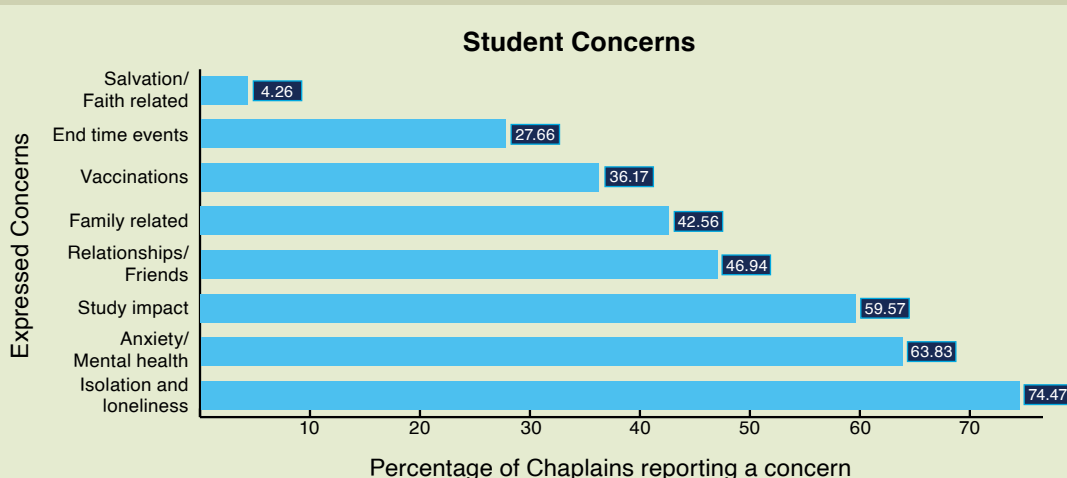
These school chaplains were also asked about the extent of stress they experienced in their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, 55.81% of those surveyed indicated that they experienced 'quite a lot' of stress during this time, a further 37.21% experienced 'a moderate amount' of stress, 6.98% experienced 'a little' stress, and there were no school chaplains who reported 'not at all' experiencing stress. Looking more closely at this question from the survey, the parametric statistical t-test for independent groups was used to determine whether the difference in mean scores was significant at the 0.05 level. After merging the years of experience demographic into two groups for purposes of statistical analysis, those with 6 or less years of experience and those with greater than 6 years experience, school chaplains with 6 or less years of experience appeared to have statistically significant higher stress during COVID-19 ($M_{\leq 6} = 2.000$, $M_{>6} = 2.588$, $t(38) = -1.989$, $p < 0.05$).

Preparedness for future COVID-19

Asked how prepared these school chaplains felt to face a situation like COVID-19 again, 55.81% of respondents indicated they felt 'very prepared', 44.19% reported feeling 'somewhat prepared', and no ASA chaplains who completed the survey

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school chaplains with 6 or less years of experience appeared to have ... higher stress during COVID-19 ... [but] were less sought out by students
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Figure 1: Percentage of Chaplains reporting a category of student concern



reported feeling either 'not sufficiently prepared' or 'not at all prepared'.

School chaplains and students

Number/frequency of requests for interaction
The data from the survey indicated that almost 81% of school chaplain respondents perceived there to be a moderate or substantial impact on the number of requests for their time, service or support stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to being asked how often students sought their support specifically related to COVID-19, school chaplains reported this to be 'frequently' approximately 11% of the time, 'occasionally' approximately 40%, 'rarely' approximately 34%, and 'never' approximately 15% of the time. Exploring these further, statistical tests revealed statistically significant results across experience and gender. Again merging the years of experience demographic into two groups, those with 6 or less years of experience and those with greater than 6 years experience, it was evident that students statistically significantly [$t(38) = 2.466$, $p < 0.05$] more regularly sought those chaplains with greater than 6 years experience ($M > 6 = 2.177$) for support related to COVID-19, than those with less experience ($M < 6 = 2.826$). Similarly, the t-test also confirmed that students were more likely to seek the support of female school chaplains ($M_f = 2.000$) than males ($M_m = 2.897$, $t(39) = 3.424$, $p < 0.05$) with concerns specifically related to COVID-19.

Specific COVID related concerns

Over 70% of school chaplains reported students raising COVID-19 when seeing them for other concerns. The nature of concerns raised by students in relation to COVID-19 was also insightful. Concerns raised in order of decreasing frequency of response related to, isolation and loneliness (74.47%), anxiety or mental health concerns (63.83%), impacts on studies (59.57%), raised relationship or friendship concerns (48.94%), raised family-related issues (42.55%), vaccinations (36.17%), raised end-time event concerns (27.66%), and raised Salvation or faith related concerns (4.26%) (Figure 1.). This question also included an open-ended response section, that elicited additional concerns raised relating to other types of fears including the impact of COVID-19 on school memory events such as school formals, overseas trips, service opportunities, school camps and 'schoolies' celebrations.

These school chaplain respondents also provided insights into what supports were offered to students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In decreasing order of frequency of response, 82.98%

of school chaplains prayed with students, 82.98% offered regular check-ins or communications with students, 59.57% provided guidance on religious, values or ethical matters, 57.45% provided encouragement of personal reflection, and 42.55% provided referral to other support services during this time. Additionally, school chaplains reported other forms of support to students, including home visitations, phone calls, wellbeing check-ins, family support seminars, and running class and group activities online.

Acknowledging school site closures, the survey asked how students accessed the school chaplains' services during the January 2020 to December 2021 COVID-19 period. School chaplains reported the use of technologies such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams (74.47%), 65.96% reported meeting face-to-face, 46.81% reported using emails, and 36.17% made use of telephone calls.

Whilst the majority of respondents indicated that they saw students experience a crisis during this pandemic time (77.1%), 59.27% of these school chaplains reported less than 25% of the students they saw during COVID-19 to be experiencing a crisis, 23.40% considered that 25-50% of the students they saw were experiencing a crisis, and 17.02% of respondents considered 50-75% of the students they saw to be experiencing a crisis.

The respondents to this survey were confident in their ability to support students with concerns relating to COVID-19. Almost 90% of respondents reported feeling 'very confident' (21.28%), or 'confident' (68.09%), with only 10.64% of these school chaplains reporting that they felt 'not confident' to support students with concerns relating to COVID-19.

School chaplains and staff

When asked about the nature of staff requests for chaplain time, service or support during the COVID-19 pandemic, 71.74% of school chaplain respondents indicated requests increased. Only 8.70% of chaplain respondents indicated that staff requests for their time, service or support decreased, while 19.57% of respondents indicated that there was 'no change' to staff requests during this period of the pandemic.

Incredibly, 95.65% of school chaplain respondents indicated that the concerns staff spoke to them about in relation to COVID-19 linked to workload stress or changes. Many (82.61%) reported staff concerns related to having to move their teaching online, and 76.09% of chaplains reported staff concerns related to the issue of vaccinations. A large majority of chaplains (73.91%) reported staff concerns in relation to general

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anxiety, while fewer (41.30%) indicated school staff raised faith-based questions with these school chaplains during this time. Staff concerns related to relationships were reported by 30.43% of chaplains.

These school chaplain respondents also provided detail as to what supports were offered to staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order of frequency of response, 84.78% offered regular check-ins or communications with staff, 82.61% of school chaplains provided prayer to staff, 65.22% reported providing guidance on religious, values or ethical matters, 56.52% provided encouragement or personal reflection, and 30.43% provided referral to other support services during this time. Additionally, school chaplains reported other forms of support being provided to staff, such as specific programs being offered or made available, the creation of fictional comedic characters who offered well-being tips, gifts of food and drinks, practical supports including media and technology support for content delivery, handwritten notes of affirmation, sharing devotions with classes to alleviate pressures on teachers, and providing COVID-19 related resources.

Of concern, 56.52% of school chaplain respondents reported feeling unable to effectively support a staff member at some point in time during the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of limitations were reported by these school chaplains regarding provision of support to staff, including things such as not being able to have face-to-face communications, limitations being placed on the role of school chaplains by school principals, carer's fatigue, implementation of guidelines relating to communication platforms and social media use, unanswered phone calls or returned emails, difficulties around visitation guidelines, an overemphasis placed on school policies, staff turnover brought about by mandated vaccinations, inability to assist increased workloads experienced by teachers, and reported anxiety created by employing bodies.

Professional development and support

The school chaplain respondents were asked whether they were offered any professional development or training to increase their ability to provide support to students and staff during the COVID-19 period under investigation. When asked if they were offered professional development or training, 29.55% responded 'yes'. 54.55% responded 'no' indicating they were not offered any professional development or training, and the remaining 15.91% were 'unsure' if they were offered professional development or training that assisted them providing support to staff or students during

Table 2: Means of how often Chaplains were connecting with factors in their roles

Factor	Ranking	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Christ	1	1.409	.658
Staff in School	2	1.546	.730
School Principal	3	1.659	.861
Local Church	4	1.682	.800
Students	5	1.818	.657
Families of Students	6	2.432	.818

this COVID-19 period. These school chaplains were also asked if they believed that further professional development could have been of assistance to them in providing improved support for students or staff, with 65.91% of school chaplain respondents answering 'yes', 11.36% of respondents answering 'no', and 22.73% answering 'unsure' as to whether further professional development would have assisted them in providing improved support for staff and students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To attempt to understand school chaplain connectedness, these respondents were asked how often they were connecting with Christ, students in their school, the school principal, families of students, their local church, and staff in their school. Table 2 sets out a hierarchy of connectedness based on the means of these school chaplain responses (1 = High level of connectedness, 4 = Low level of connectedness). Chaplains asserted a spiritual connection with Christ as their highest connectedness. The data further indicates that in the context of their temporal roles, they most frequently connected with school staff and the school principal. The difference in the higher connectedness between chaplains and staff (M = 1.546) compared with chaplains and principals (M = 1.659) proved statistically significant in paired samples statistics [$t(44) = 1.094, p < .001$]. This would suggest school chaplains perceived greater support from school staff as opposed to the school principal during the COVID pandemic.

The school chaplains who were surveyed were asked the extent to which support for school chaplains had changed as a result of COVID-19. Only 9.09% of school chaplains reported that support has been 'greatly increased' because of COVID-19, while 22.73% reported support has 'increased somewhat', 63.64% of school chaplains

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29.55% responded 'yes', that they were offered professional development or training, 54.55% responded 'no'”

Table 3: Means of the extent chaplains felt supported by factors in their roles

Factor	Ranking	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Your friends and family	1	1.500	.665
The school principal	2	1.727	.872
The school community	3	2.046	.806
Your church family and community	4	2.068	.759
The church system	5	2.182	.896
The education system	6	2.364	.891
The students	7	2.568	.925

“40% of students ... experienced a crisis during the period explored ... a higher need for the support of school staff, as evidenced by 71.4% of school chaplains

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reported that support is ‘about the same’, and 4.55% of chaplains reported that support has ‘decreased’ as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked to what extent these school chaplains were supported by the education system or church system they are employed by, the school principal, the school community, their church family and community, by the students, or by friends and family, a hierarchy of support emerged based on the means of their responses. Table 3 shows a hierarchy of support based on the ranking of support based on the means of the individual chaplain support factors (1 = High level of support, 4 = Low level of support). The data suggests these chaplains felt most supported during COVID-19 by friends and family, followed by the school principal, school community, church family and community, employing bodies, and lastly, the students.

Discussion

The role of the school chaplain

It is evident that COVID-19 impacted the role of school chaplains.

Consistent with literature elsewhere in the Australian chaplaincy context, 93% of ASA school chaplains found their roles rewarding. Research undertaken in Australia by Stanford and Timms (2021), and in which almost half (45%) of respondents were school chaplains, found that their research participants “reported a strong sense of fulfillment in relation to the opportunity afforded by their work to help others negotiate difficult experiences in their lives” (p. 290). This research also indicated that the chaplain respondents

“tended to regard their work positively and that it has great meaning for them” (p. 290). These areas relate to what the literature refers to as ‘compassion satisfaction’ – the idea that “individuals achieve personal fulfilment and are thereby rewarded, through helping others” (p. 285).

That 81.4% of school chaplains reported they extended beyond their usual role as a chaplain to provide support to students, staff, parents and the broader school community, is in some ways expected. The school-based educational literature from the pandemic period paints a particularly challenging landscape, with broad recognition of a profession under extraordinary pressure. Flack et al. (2020) noted in their research, which explored more than 3500 educator perspectives of the impact of teaching and learning in Australia and New Zealand, that teachers reported significant increases in demands on their time under remote learning, as well as feelings of social isolation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the comments in the open-ended responses describing the concerns staff discussed with chaplains reflected these pressures, with one respondent concisely stating, “Keeping up with all the changes that were occurring at a fast pace”.

School chaplains and students

Given the broader educational literature exploring the pandemic period during 2020 and 2021, it is no surprise that 80% of school chaplains indicated COVID-19 impacted student requests for their time. Concerningly, 40% of students are reported to have experienced a crisis during the period explored. With school lockdowns, heavily regulated school environments, increased social distancing and a more challenging environment in which to meet face-to-face, school chaplains were forced to adopt online technologies to stay connected to students. The majority (58%) of school chaplain and student interactions between January 2020 and December 2021 involved digital technology as the communication medium. The respondents acknowledged this meant less than ideal circumstances in their support of students experiencing a crisis. This finding is consistent with other literature, with “increased social isolation and reduced ability to support student wellbeing” (Sacks, et al, 2020, para. 6) being an identified challenge of the school-led remote learning environment in Australia during this time.

While such challenges were presented, school chaplains continued to offer a wide scope of support to students during this time. Such supports included encouragement, prayer, spiritual guidance, and referrals to counselling and other support

services. In most cases, regular check-ins were established with the student.

School chaplains and staff

The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to create a higher need for the support of school staff, as evidenced by 71.4% of school chaplains indicating that staff requests for their time, services and support increased. This would appear consistent with literature that indicated teachers were experiencing greater workplace pressures during this time. Workload stress, moving to teaching online, adapting to rapid changes, vaccination related stresses, and other pandemic induced concerns were all identified within the survey findings that combined to create increased requests from staff for school chaplain time. These responses raise the question of scope regarding the school chaplain's role and priorities, and a greater understanding of time and support required for teaching staff on an ongoing basis, as well as during times of adversity (such as during natural disasters and future pandemics). This is in stark contrast to existing literature from the 2009 NSCP evaluation, where only 9% of staff reported receiving pastoral care from school chaplains.

Additionally, 56% of school chaplains felt they were unable to effectively support a student or staff member during COVID-19, suggesting there may be an increased need to provide professional development or additional resources to school chaplains to continue to provide strong levels of support to both staff and students. The school chaplains identified limitations in their ability to provide support to students or staff during COVID-19, stating examples such as limited opportunities to connect in a face-to-face setting, rapidly changing rules that impacted both communication and technology types that could be utilised, students becoming more insular, health-related concerns, and awareness of a greater need for support yet often not knowing the best type of support needed. In contrast, there were respondents who did not feel they encountered limitations, instead taking the view that *"It was a time to be creative in our approach to carrying out our roles!"*.

Professional development and support

With respect to professional development and support, the research team sought to understand whether professional development was offered, what sort of professional development would have been welcomed or perceived as increasing capability to respond to the pandemic. Relationships between the school chaplains

and principals, as well as the broader school community, in terms of perceived support during COVID-19 were also explored.

Only 30% of school chaplains reported being offered professional development during this time. Greater or increased opportunities for professional development were desired by respondents, with 66% of chaplains indicating their view was that further professional development could have enabled them in providing improved support for students and staff.

The open-ended question in the professional development and support section of the survey identified a number of supports that could be further explored in the context of this particular education system. When asked what better support for school chaplains might look like, respondents identified several elements that could assist school chaplains professionally and personally. Comments such as *"Personal check-ins from Admin"*, *"People calling or emailing to check on us"*, *"There was no one checking in to make sure the chaplains were ok"* all acknowledge the need for improved systemic support for these school chaplains. One respondent captured this sentiment, stating *"We were the ones doing the supporting, it didn't often go the other way around"*. In addition, increased supervision of chaplains and mentoring were commonly identified as elements these school chaplains would consider to be of increased support to them, while wide ranging components from counselling vouchers, increased IT support, and professional resources were all identified as supports that could be made available.

Conclusion

This research is important because it provides insight into the perspectives of school chaplains working during COVID-19 in a faith-based education system, areas that remain under reported in the literature. This study found that chaplains experienced more requests for their time and support from students and staff during COVID-19, working through serious student and staff concerns amid increased demand and stress within their roles. While these school chaplains still overwhelmingly found their roles rewarding, it emerged that more could be done to provide support to them, including offering more professional development opportunities, encouraging more self-care, and creating networking opportunities with chaplaincy colleagues. Systemically, supports in the forms of increased supervision including mentoring and resource provision are highlighted as areas for further consideration.

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The findings here suggest some directions for future research investigating school chaplain perspectives. These directions include further exploration of school chaplains' psychological health and the support provided by and to chaplains in their roles, as well as the working relationships that exist between them and their school principals, their teacher colleagues and the students they provide support to. With increasing instances of crises impacting on schools and their communities, recognising the impacts of COVID-19 and the pressure points created within school chaplaincy roles can do much to support those who provide important pastoral care within these school communities. **TEACH**

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