Trauma-Informed Holistic Education: Students' Experiences of Healing Through Salesian Chaplaincy in Vocational Higher Education

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Abstract

This study explores how students with adverse childhood experiences navigate healing and growth through Salesian chaplaincy services in vocational higher education. Using narrative inquiry methodology, the research examined MCAST students' lived experiences, revealing how integrated trauma-informed and holistic approaches facilitate earned secure attachment through alternative attachment figures. The study employed the thematic narrative analysis method for data analysis. Two group interviews were held with nine participants. Participants' narratives reveal three interconnected themes: redefining family through alternative attachments when biological families fail to provide safety; navigating parental absence and educational disappointments whilst maintaining aspirations; and experiencing healing through consistent adult presence and faith transmission. The study validates that trauma-informed principles combined with holistic pedagogy create conditions for healing. Salesian chaplaincy's accompaniment model—characterized by consistent presence, family-style relationships, and recognizing inherent giftedness—operationalizes both frameworks practically. Results demonstrate that relationships within educational settings function as agents of healing when characterized by availability, non-judgmental listening, and integration of spiritual dimensions.

Keywords: *trauma-informed education, holistic education, Salesian spirituality, earned secure attachment, chaplaincy services*

By the time students enter higher education, 66 to 85 percent carry histories of traumatic experiences that profoundly shape their capacity to trust, form relationships, and engage in learning (Davidson, 2024). These experiences—spanning neglect, abandonment, family dysfunction, and broken trust—leave lasting impacts on students' neurobiological development and relational capacities (van der Kolk, 2014).

Developmental trauma fundamentally disrupts human capacity for trusting relationships. Students who have experienced childhood trauma "may be distrustful or suspicious of others, leading them to question the reliability and predictability of their relationships" (Davidson,

2024, p. 7). Yet paradoxically, it is precisely through relationships—consistent, caring relationships with trustworthy adults—that attachment of wounds can begin to heal.

Research on earned secure attachment demonstrates that individuals with insecure childhood attachments can develop secure relational patterns through "corrective emotional experiences" with alternative attachment figures (Jańczak, 2024, p. 31). Non-parental adults can serve as "safe haven" and "secure base" figures (Manvelian et al., 2023). Wilson-Ching and Berger (2024) emphasize that "relationships within school settings can function as agents of healing for trauma-exposed students" (p. 8199).

While trauma-informed approaches address wounds that impede development, holistic education provides a broader framework for comprehensive human flourishing. Ginwright's (2018) "healing-centered engagement" embraces pathways, culture, spirituality, civic action and collective healing for transformation. The Salesian approach provides a culturally embedded framework integrating trauma-responsive care with holistic development, holding that "it is not doing something for young people that counts but being someone to them" (Lydon, 2022, p. 78).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) (2014) foundational definition of trauma explicitly includes spiritual well-being among affected dimensions. McCormick et al. (2017) demonstrate that students with adverse childhood experiences struggle with spiritual dimensions—particularly ultimate meaning struggles mediating relationships between childhood adversity and mental health.

This study explores MCAST (Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology) students' lived experiences, examining: *What are the stories of MCAST students as they weave their personal experiences and beliefs into their learning journeys through the formal educational environment?*

Literature Review

Developmental Trauma in Higher Education

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study revealed that experiences of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction are pervasive for public health issues. Original ACE study findings indicated that one in five Americans experienced sexual abuse as children, one in four experienced physical abuse, one in three witnessed domestic violence, and one in four grew up with alcoholic relatives (Felitti et al., 1998). Crucially, the study demonstrated a dose-response relationship: more adverse experiences correlate with greater risk for negative adult outcomes.

Van der Kolk (2014) emphasizes that these experiences produce measurable neurobiological changes. Developmental trauma recalibrates the brain's alarm system, resulting in hyperactivated threat detection, underdeveloped executive functioning, altered stress hormone systems, and compromised memory consolidation. These changes manifest in educational settings as difficulty concentrating; behavioral challenges often misinterpreted as defiance, social isolation due to mistrust, and academic underperformance.

Davidson (2024) provides prevalence data indicating that "by the time they reach college, 66 to 85 percent of youth report lifetime traumatic event exposure." (p. 1) Critically, trauma "affects one's ability (or willingness) to form relationships with others. Individuals who have experienced childhood trauma may be distrustful or suspicious of others, leading them to question the reliability and predictability of their relationships. (Ibid) emphasizes a crucial reframe: trauma-informed educators must be more concerned with the

problem effecting the person, contrary to seeing the person as a problem.

Spiritual Struggles and Meaning-Making

McCormick et al. (2017) conducted a study of 458 young adults examining the relationship between ACEs and six types of religious/spiritual struggles. The research found that ACEs positively correlated with all six types, with struggles related to ultimate meaning mediating the relationship between ACEs and mental health symptoms. This suggests that students with adverse childhood experiences require support not only for psychological symptoms but for fundamental questions about meaning, purpose, and existential orientation. If trauma disrupts students' capacity to make meaning and find purpose, and if this meaning-disruption mediates mental health outcomes, then educational approaches must address spiritual and existential dimensions alongside academic and psychological support.

Trauma-Informed Education Principles

Trauma-informed education adapts mental health trauma treatment principles to educational settings, creating environments that recognize trauma's prevalence, avoid re-traumatization, and actively facilitate healing. SAMHSA (2014) defines trauma as experiences producing "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual" (p.7)s" explicitly recognizing spiritual dimensions.

The framework articulates six principles: Safety; Trustworthiness and Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration and Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice, and Choice; and Attention to Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues. Carello and Butler (2015) emphasize that "a trauma history may impact your students' academic performance, even without trauma being a topic in the classroom" (pp. 163-164), noting that educators must "recognize that any student may be (or become) vulnerable, and we therefore have a responsibility to prevent possible harm."

Bath (2008) identifies three pillars of trauma-informed care: safety, connections, and managing emotional impulses. Critically, Bath emphasizes "that much of the healing from trauma can take place in non-clinical settings" (p.17). Experience shows that many people recover from trauma exposure without seeking professional assistance by processing, and resolving their injuries in the context of family, friendship, and other relationships. This validates non-clinical relational supports as legitimate trauma-responsive interventions.

Attachment Theory and Earned Security

Attachment theory provides the developmental framework for understanding both how trauma disrupts relational capacities and how healing occurs. Bowlby's (1969) foundational work established that humans biologically require secure attachment figures, that early attachment patterns create 'internal working models' shaping subsequent relationships, and that insecure attachment patterns result from inconsistent, unresponsive, or frightening caregivers.

Attachment patterns can be reorganized throughout life. Jańczak (2024) defines earned-secure attachment as "exhibiting secure attachment to their parents while evaluating the quality of childhood care from them as low" (p. 31). Research found that 64% of participants reported having an important adult other than parents in childhood, and these alternative

attachment figures provided "corrective emotional experience vital for subsequent changes in an individual's relational and emotional functioning" (p. 32).

Manvelian et al. (2023) demonstrated that trained mentors can promote attachment security in college students through emotionally-focused relationships. Mentors served as ‘safe haven’ and ‘secure base’ figures, resulting in significant decreases in both attachment anxiety and avoidance. The researchers concluded that "by serving as a corrective attachment experience, a mentor has the ability to help change a youth's perception of social support as a means for coping with distress."

Healing-Centered Engagement and Holistic Approaches

Ginwright (2018) critiques trauma-informed care for being potentially pathologizing, noting that the term 'trauma-informed care' was akin to saying “you are the worst thing that ever happened to you” (para 6). Ginwright proposes instead that healing-centered engagement is "holistic involving culture, spirituality, civic action and collective healing," (para 10) emphasizing not merely individual treatment but transformation of environments and relationships. This approach asks not only what happened to you? but what's right with you?—recognizing inherent strengths, cultural assets, and spiritual resources.

Miller (2007) articulates a holistic education as being concerned with connections in human experience—connections between mind and body, between linear thinking and intuitive ways of knowing, between individual and community, and between the personal self and the transpersonal self. Therefore, holistic education is said to emphasize a) the education of the whole person, b) interconnection and integration,c) meaning, purpose, and values, and d) student-centered experiential learning.

Kessler (2000) identifies seven gateways to the soul that young people seek: deep connection, silence and solitude, meaning and purpose, joy and delight, creative drive, transcendence, and initiation. Additionally, Palmer being sighted in the foreword for the book titled by Kessler, *The Soul of Education* warns that "without healthy forums led by responsible adults, young people seek these gateways on their own, sometimes in destructive ways like drugs, sex, suicide, hazing, and even murder." (p. 1)

Salesian Spirituality as Integrated Framework

The Salesian approach to youth ministry, grounded in St. John Bosco's nineteenth-century work, provides a culturally embedded framework that remarkably aligns with contemporary trauma-informed and holistic education principles. Lydon (2022) explains that for Bosco, "the first principle of pastoral care was presence," (p.5) with the Salesian educator knowing pupils and being "prepared to make the first move" (p.5)—paralleling attachment theory's emphasis on caregiver initiative and availability.

The Salesian method emphasizes the "Preventive System"—creating environments characterized by loving presence that prevents problems rather than punishing after the fact. Van der Kolk (2014) demonstrates that punitive discipline triggers traumatized students' hyperactive threat responses, making learning impossible. The Salesian emphasis on prevention through positive relationship creates neurobiologically appropriate environments for trauma survivors.

McDonnell (2022) articulates that the Salesian approach centers on reason, religion, and loving-kindness." Critically, the Salesian principle

holds that "it is not doing something for young people that counts but being someone to them. It is not what we do for them, it is who we are to them" (cited in Lydon, 2022, p. 78). This ontological emphasis—being rather than doing—aligns with attachment research demonstrating that healing occurs through consistent relational presence rather than specific interventions.

The "family spirit" dimension creates institutional environments that feel like home, with warmth and belonging combined with clear structure. Formosa (2022) emphasizes 'accompaniment'—walking with young people rather than leading or directing them—as central to the Salesian approach, providing exactly what attachment research suggests traumatized youth require: consistent, non-abandoning adults who remain present through difficulties.

Provision of Chaplaincy as Relational Presence

Sherwood et al. (2023) found that chaplaincy effectiveness centers on "availability and availability now because there are very, very few people in the university who are available now... what most of them want is time and simply a sympathetic ear" (p.207). Van Stee et al. (2021) found that students engaging with campus chaplains reported better ability to integrate spirituality into daily life and feeling supported in wrestling with existential questions, yet did not support the idea that engaged students dealt better with daily stressors. This research therefore concludes that chaplains are an active part of the student's exploration of unanswered questions rather than a cushioning for dealing with daily life stressors; done by assisting students in answering core questions of meaning, purpose, and belonging.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes that:

1. Adverse childhood experiences are prevalent among college students and actively affect their educational engagement through neurobiological, relational, and existential impacts.
2. Trauma disrupts relational capacities, yet healing occurs through corrective relationships with alternative attachment figures.
3. Trauma affects spiritual dimensions including struggles with ultimate meaning.
4. Both trauma-informed principles and holistic pedagogies emphasize relational presence and comprehensive attention to all dimensions of personhood.
5. Salesian spirituality provides a culturally embedded framework integrating these principles through specific practices.

However, limited research examines how students with complex developmental histories experience integrated trauma-responsive, holistic support in vocational higher education settings, or how spiritually grounded services operationalize these principles in practice. This study addresses these gaps through narrative inquiry into MCAST students' lived experiences with Salesian-grounded chaplaincy services.

Methodological Approach and Rationale

This study employed narrative inquiry as its methodological framework to explore MCAST students' lived experiences of healing through Salesian chaplaincy services. Narrative inquiry aligns with both trauma-informed research principles and the Salesian pedagogical philosophy by centering participant voice whilst honoring their agency as protagonists of their own stories. After two decades working with young people across voluntary, social, and educational

sectors, I sought to understand perceived experiences affecting students' personal dimensions—experiences often invisible within traditional educational research yet central to understanding how trauma-informed holistic education facilitates healing.

Narrative inquiry "accentuates the voice of the respondents, together with the reflexivity of the researcher" (Falzon, 2023, p. 36), creating landscapes where unified understanding emerges. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) articulate, narrative inquiry seeks to "understand experience" (p. 17) through what they term "experiencing the experience." This required entering a four-dimensional approach examining participants' inward and outward movements (personal and social dimensions), forward and backward movements (temporality), and situational contexts as they recounted stories—some remaining as memories, others actively impacting daily decisions.

The research embraced constructivist philosophy with subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology (Saunders et al., 2016), rejecting preconceived notions about what young people should experience. This aligns with Salesian spirituality's emphasis on allowing young people to remain protagonists of their lives. Additionally, recognizing that participants faced social injustices requiring attention to power dynamics, I adopted a transformative worldview stance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), believing that addressing the temporal and spatial dimensions they inhabit could facilitate change and renewed vision.

Thematic Narrative Analysis Framework

The analytical approach employed thematic narrative analysis grounded in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: temporality, personal and social dimensions, and situation. This framework illuminated how participants navigate complex developmental histories whilst preparing for active citizenship.

Temporality captured how past experiences continue shaping present realities. Participants' narratives revealed unresolved abandonment, reconciled family wounds, and educational disappointments—all demonstrating trauma's persistence whilst revealing possibilities for transformation through present relational experiences.

The personal and social dimension explored how individual wounds exist within social contexts. The theme "broken selves and emergence of trust" revealed participants redefining family based on relational qualities rather than biology—seeking alternative attachments when primary attachments failed. This demonstrated both trauma's relational disruption and resilience in reorganizing attachment seeking toward available safe others.

The situation captured participants' aspirations despite adversities—what emerged as "light at the end of the adolescent tunnel." Students expressed desires to navigate toward futures transcending past traumas, engaging in meaningful relationships characterized by trust, safety, and belonging.

This three-dimensional framework enabled analysis revealing not merely what participants experienced but how they made meaning from experiences, how past shapes present whilst present creates possibilities for different future trajectories, and how individual struggles exist within broader social contexts requiring structural as well as individual responses.

Participant Selection and Data Collection

Convenience sampling selected students willing to discuss personal life matters. Whilst probability of

selection depended on availability and willingness, invitations extended to all students in classes I lecture, ensuring equal participation opportunity regardless of race, color, gender, or age. The existing lecturer-student relationship facilitated dialogue whilst requiring careful attention to power dynamics and dual role ethics.

Semi-structured narrative interviews employed thematic areas from Floridia's (2022) study as "canvas" for discussing important life situations. Rather than rigid structure, the interview guide provided language helping participants discuss life circumstances whilst maintaining flexibility for them to respond to questions in preferred order or emphasis. This ensured participants reflected upon and voiced what held importance for them—central to both narrative inquiry and trauma-informed research ethics.

Ethical Considerations: Trauma-Informed Research Design

The methodology aligned with trauma-informed research principles (Newman et al., 2006). The study design incorporated participant agency through semi-structured format interviews allowing control over content and pacing, meaning making through narrative construction as itself therapeutic (van der Kolk, 2014), researcher as attuned listener validating experiences, and participants choosing what to share without pressure to disclose specific traumas namely on themes surrounding ‘relationships’ and ‘poverty’. This approach minimized re-traumatization risk whilst honoring participants' autonomy.

Following institutional protocols, information letters secured departmental approval before third-party invitation to students. Groups organized by language preference (Maltese-speaking and English-speaking) ensured linguistic comfort. All data collection occurred through face-to-face interviews, with transcription conducted by the researcher and data not shared with third parties, maintaining confidentiality. Interview guides received feedback regarding content and syntax, with comparison between English and Maltese versions ensuring continuity in tone and meaning.

Relational ethics remained paramount, particularly regarding cultural sensitivity. With participants from different cultural backgrounds, I paused interviews when necessary to acquire better understanding of religious or cultural implications, demonstrating respect for diverse meaning-making frameworks participants brought to their narratives.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Transferability was ensured through "thick descriptions" enabling findings' application to other contexts where practitioners work with young people (Falzon, 2023). Credibility stemmed from articulating data without preconceived conclusions, remaining open to where young people find authenticity. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through internal coherence between data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations, creating "meaning coherence" with visible flows between elements (Falzon, 2023). Participants received narrative analysis copies, ensuring documented content represented their voices—achieving trustworthiness through "verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 264).

Findings and Discussions

Theme 1: Redefining Family? Broken Trust and the Emergence of Alternative Attachments

The first theme illuminates participants' experiences of disrupted family attachments and their adaptive reorganization of attachment seeking toward peers and trusted adults—precisely what attachment theory describes as earned security through alternative attachment figures (Jańczak, 2024). Participants consistently redefined family based on relational qualities rather than biology, revealing both wounds of broken trust and resilience to seek healing relationships elsewhere. As one participant articulated:

> Family... is not necessarily my blood family, sometimes I receive respect from a friend... so that's how I see it family is respect. For example, I do not see any respect from my family.. I see more respect from K... you know?!.. (Participant FM)

This redefinition represents not pathology but adaptive reorganization. Davidson (2024) describes how trauma disrupts the capacity to trust; FM's response demonstrates recognition that trust and respect—core elements of secure attachment—can be found outside biological family when family fails to provide them. This exemplifies Jańczak's (2024) finding that alternative attachment figures provide "corrective emotional (p. 31).

Another participant elaborated on this relational selectivity:

> For me family is someone or a community I feel like, I feel safe with. So for example, my family obviously I am close with, but, I consider M as part of my family. Since I share certain stuff with her which I do not do with my parents. Because maybe I do not feel comfortable with them... its this sense of enclosure... someone I can go to when I have problems, when I need, they help me... Even for example if it's not the best advice, but they won't judge you for it. (Participant K)

K's narrative reveals sophisticated relational assessment: recognizing that whilst maintaining biological family connections, emotional safety exists elsewhere. The phrase "they won't judge you for it" captures Bath's (2008) validation pillar—what trauma survivors desperately need is relationships where vulnerability doesn't result in shame or rejection. K has identified where such safety exists and appropriately reorganized attachment accordingly. When probed about this boundary, K confirmed: "Exactly... because (M), I know she won't judge me for it." This boundary recognition demonstrates what Manvelian et al. (2023) describe: students discerning which relationships can serve as "safe haven" for processing challenges.

Another participant bridged these perspectives:

> I agree with what they have said... but I would also like to add in unconditional love... I think safety is really important. Not all blood gives you safety. But you have friends that become family in this sense, because they can provide that sense of safety. (Participant A)

A's phrase "not all blood gives you safety" directly names what trauma research demonstrates: biological relationship guarantees nothing about attachment security. The capacity to recognize this reality and seek safety elsewhere represents what Jańczak (2024) terms earned security as adults who help reframe malevolent childhood experiences to develop secure relationships with youth affected by childhood trauma.

The discussion then explored trust-building processes. When asked about trusting outsiders as insiders, K responded: "I think it's the comfort that you receive from them, and sometimes, when you are really passing through a tough moment, and they are there for you... it's not like a one-time thing..." The discussion continued:

> There were a number of things that led up to trusting that person, it started with small petty things, first we built a relationship, and then I could tell that I really trusted her, that we trusted each other. (Participant M)

"The first time I saw her I wasn't going to go tell her everything about me. But then this is something that happens by time, you start opening up, you know." (Participant K) This exchange illuminates the gradual trust-building process that Manvelian et al. (2023) describe; relationships which are characterized by consistent, non-betraying presence over time create the necessary conditions for reorganization of relational trust, shifting from insecure to secure patterns. These small ongoing events that build up trust, represent what the traumatized person internalizes as evidence that this person will not abandon, betray, or shame—namely what failed in primary family attachments.

One participant revealed different adaptive strategy:

> For me, I grew up with many blood relatives, without many blood relatives wanting to be family, so from a young age I always thought of friends as family. I'm an oversharer, so I tell people things, that I should be telling people that I trust... I don't build the rapport first... I spill it first and then end up hoping that they are to be trusted. (Participant A)

A's self-identified pattern—"I'm an oversharer... I spill it first"—demonstrates that trauma survivors develop varied adaptive strategies rather than following uniform patterns.

Another participant described how a parent facilitated alternative attachments:

> For me too, I was an only child, or like a lonely child, because between my sibling and me there are 7 years, and she was born with a disability... So it was my mother who helped me to come out of my shell. She used to tell me, invite your friend over because otherwise you are going to end up all alone... My home was like a slumber party, every weekend with sleepovers... Only now that I grew, I am having close relationships with my family. (Participant M)

M's narrative reveals a parent facilitating alternative attachments when family structure couldn't provide peer connections. The mother's intervention—"invite your friend over, because otherwise you are going to end up all alone"—represents parental recognition that the child needed peer relationships for healthy development.

One participant described secure family attachment for comparison:

> For me, my family is all really close... I think for me family is someone also who influences, who is influential, someone you go to for advice. For me I'm very lucky I guess because me and my family are very close. I'm most comfortable around them... Siblings. Yeah... I have three older and two younger siblings. (Participant I)

I's experience provides the comparison point—what secure family attachment looks like—against which FM, K, A, and M's adaptive reorganization becomes visible as resilient response to family dysfunction rather than personal failing.

These narratives validate central claims from attachment and trauma literature: (a) trauma disrupts primary attachments, creating mistrust (Davidson, 2024; van der Kolk, 2014); (b) humans adaptively reorganize attachment seeking toward available safe others when primary attachments fail (Jańczak, 2024); (c) earned security develops through accumulated experiences of consistent, non-betraying presence (Manvelian et al., 2023); and (d) the capacity to identify safe relationships represents resilience rather than pathology (Ginwright, 2018).

Theme 2: Navigating Parental Absence and Educational Aspirations—The Impact of Unresolved Abandonment

The second theme explores how parental absence and family dysfunction create lasting wounds affecting students' educational trajectories and sense of self—demonstrating trauma's multidimensional impacts. One participant's narrative powerfully illustrated unresolved abandonment:

For example, my mother and father, since they were separated, my father lived separately, and through this I was forgotten by him, even though he was legally obliged to visit me. He lied about not coming to see me and blamed it on his work. Until today I have not forgiven him. (Participant S)

This narrative exemplifies what van der Kolk (2014) terms *betrayal trauma*—harm inflicted by those supposed to provide safety and care. The father's legal obligation to visit heightens the betrayal: he was required to maintain connection yet chose not to. The lies compound the betrayal, teaching the child that the father not only abandons but deceives. The phrase "until today I have not forgiven him" indicates persistence of attachment wounds into emerging adulthood—unresolved trauma because the betrayal was never acknowledged or repaired.

Conversely, another participant described reconciliation:

> It was my mum herself who told me that I had to abandon you at times and leave you to fend on your own, to take care of your sister with a disability. Today we have fixed past hurts by communicating them to one another. (Participant M)

This narrative demonstrates repair possibility even after significant hurt. The mother's explicit acknowledgment ("I had to abandon you") combined with explanation of circumstances provides context helping the young person understand abandonment as circumstantial rather than reflecting unworthiness. The phrase "today we have fixed past hurts by communicating them to one another" exemplifies corrective relational experiences that modify internal working models (Manvelian et al., 2023). The contrast between A's unresolved abandonment and M's reconciliation validates attachment theory's emphasis on repair: earned security becomes possible through acknowledgment of harm, honest communication, and ongoing care demonstration.

Another participant revealed how parental absence affected educational aspirations. When asked about educational disappointments: "I just feel disappointed... when I look out and see the advantage that other people would have had, going to school. It's also an unfortunate situation (Participant I)." When asked: "have you ever voiced it?" 'I' responded: "Like this voiced it?

No... yeah... yeah... it's sad..." (with a tear in her eye). When asked about this sadness, 'I' replied: "Yeah, I think. It is what it is... I'm happy with where I am... No, I do not hold a grudge about it." This exchange demonstrates trauma-informed principles in practice: attunement to emotional content, gentle probing allowing participant agency, validation of complex emotions, and therapeutic value of narrative construction. The phrase "it is what it is" combined with "I'm happy with where I am" demonstrates what Ginwright (2018) terms healing-centered engagement: refusing to be defined solely by past disappointments whilst acknowledging their reality.

Maltese participants revealed how family dynamics shaped educational engagement:

> For example my mum, when I was still young, I wasn't studying... she (mum) used to run after me in this case, telling me, study, study, study, and if it wasn't for that, today, I'd be working because I didn't finish school... She saved me, because, if it wasn't for her... Today I say thank goodness.. now, today, on the contrary, today I want to go to school more, because I'm taking pleasure. (Participant K2)

K2's narrative reveals a parent providing exactly what attachment theory describes as necessary: consistent presence, appropriate boundaries, and persistent care despite adolescent resistance. The phrase "she saved me" indicates recognition that parental persistence provided the structure necessary for educational success.

> For me, the more you run after me and tell me to do things, the more I'll do the opposite... I'm right now giving importance to school because they're not giving importance as a school... I'm taking pleasure doing school things because I'm doing them seriously. You're not doing it for people... you're doing it from your heart. (Participant S)

S's "reverse psychology" pattern demonstrates adolescent autonomy seeking. Her current engagement stems from internal motivation ("doing it from your heart") rather than external pressure, validating what trauma-informed and holistic education emphasize; sustainable engagement requires student agency (Carello & Butler, 2015; Miller, 2007).

> I think that time when they're running after you, you see it as a bad thing, because when I was in secondary school my mum used to run after me a lot to study and I used to get angry, but now I value it, I understand that she wanted the best for me. But when you're in that moment you don't see it like that. (Participant J)

J's developmental reflection demonstrates growing capacity for perspective-taking—recognizing that parental actions experienced as controlling in adolescence stemmed from care rather than malice. This represents the reflexivity that narrative inquiry seeks: students making meaning of past experiences through present understanding (van der Kolk, 2014).

These narratives validate McCormick et al.'s (2017) findings that adverse childhood experiences create not only psychological distress but spiritual struggles with meaning and purpose. P4 struggles with existential questions: "Why did my father abandon me?" I grapples with lost educational potential. These represent fundamentally spiritual questions requiring spiritual accompaniment—meaning-making support that chaplaincy services can provide (van Stee et al., 2021).

Theme 3: The Healing Power of Presence—Adult Support and Faith Transmission as Protective Factors

The third theme captures how trusted adult presence and faith transmission facilitate resilience and healing, validating both attachment theory's emphasis on alternative attachment figures and research on spirituality as protective factor (Jańczak, 2024; McCormick et al., 2017).

One participant's powerful narrative about her coach demonstrates the profound impact of alternative attachment figures:

> When I was training, the coach… I wasn't adoring him, because that's a big word, but he was truly important... I found him there not just for sports, but also for personal life, because if you're in a bad mental state, you're not going to go to sports and do well... when I would go badly, that thing he would do to me and say to me, 'I'm going to talk to you,' he'd take me outside, 'are you ok?' And that was like a tap on the shoulder... when someone checks up on you... and truly that was important, it had very good effects on me, in fact just recently it was his birthday and I've been stopped for a year and something, and I sent him, 'even though you're no longer my coach,' like in my mind I don't call him by name, he remained the coach... he still remained relevant to my life... just recently, I was doing weightlifting, and at home I have bars, the last time I said, school finished and I went up to the house and went to train there alone... I was alone, but I felt like he was there and that he was there beside me, meaning that's how much he remained relevant. I started imagining him; he's there in the corner, saying 'isn't that right...?' for me it's a big thing. For me I'm truly grateful to him. (Participant K2)

K2's narrative exemplifies what Manvelian et al. (2023) describe as "safe haven" and "secure base" functions. The coach provided consistent presence, attuned to her emotional states ("are you ok?"), creating conditions for emotional regulation. Even a year after stopping training, his internalized presence provides comfort during isolation—demonstrating how alternative attachment figures become integrated into students' internal working models. The phrase "I felt like he was there beside me" reveals the depth of attachment security earned through consistent, caring presence.

When the depth of this relationship was explored further, K2 elaborated:

> I'm getting emotional now. And still now, sometimes I see the trophies and whatever, I would burst out crying... That's why the coach retains a special place in my life, because I know when I was at a place of needing him, and I know that if I need him for something in my life, I can reach out to him. I know he'll help me, even though I'm no longer his student. I know he's still there in some way. (Participant K2)

This emotional response during the interview itself demonstrates the ongoing impact. The recognition that "he's still there" even though the formal coaching relationship ended validates Jańczak's (2024) finding that alternative attachment figures provide lasting corrective experiences that reshape attachment patterns.

Maltese participants described how pastoral services and spiritual companionship provide similar presence. When discussing the importance of adult guidance:

> For me personally, when I had the problem with religion, hardly anyone helped me, and it was a priest himself who helped me with the thing... I was disappointed to a certain point, and before Mass I would be next to him, and when I asked him, he told me that the important thing is that as a person you're good, now if you believe in the Lord or someone else the important thing is that inherently you're a good person. You don't have to force the belief onto yourself. He was a priest himself who gave you room to allow the bible's message to grow organically on you, as opposed to being a dogmatic teaching. (Participant S)

S's narrative demonstrates how spiritual care providers can offer exactly what trauma-informed approaches advocate: validation without judgment, space for questioning, and emphasis on inherent worth rather than conditional acceptance. The priest's response—"the important thing is that as a person, you're good"—exemplifies what Bath (2008) identifies as creating safety through unconditional positive regard. This validates that trauma-informed care principles apply not only to clinical settings but to spiritual companionship, where existential questions arising from trauma can be addressed.

Another participant described the Salesian approach to spiritual accompaniment:

> Now that I spend a lot of my time with the Salesians in a youth group, because as you said a lot, the Salesians pursue you, but not in an unpleasant way, at least I never felt it unpleasant at all... those who encouraged me in taking my first steps were my friends themselves meaning, I met them through work and they'd tell me, they do this, and they meet with the Salesian youth group, and with the fathers (priests)... but now that I have taken the plunge also. The priests and the religious brothers, they're a bit younger and so on, not just in age... yet they are open minded, that they try to bring religion into the lives of the youth, in a very practical way, that you can live with it, meaning they're not first religion, second religion, third religion, as I used to think it, God doesn't have to be number one, you can put it number two or number three, as long as you still brought God into your life. (Participant J)

J's narrative demonstrates several key principles: (1) the importance of persistent, caring adult presence that doesn't feel coercive ("pursue you, but not in an unpleasant way"); (2) the distinction between authoritarian control and loving accompaniment; (3) the effectiveness of meeting young people where they are rather than imposing rigid structures; and (4) the integration of spiritual formation with relational connection. This validates Lydon's (2022) articulation of Salesian accompaniment—being present in the totality of young people's lives, not just formal religious contexts. The Salesians' ability to make faith accessible and integrated with daily life exemplifies holistic education's emphasis on connection and meaning making (Miller, 2007).

One participant emphasized faith transmission as protective "For me, I owe it to my parents because they taught me about faith and religion.... They taught me good morals (Participant I)." When asked to explain the benefits the same participant stated:

So like, there are so many questions about life that I have, and it (religion) like gives meaning and purpose, if I didn't have that, it would be like real just.. really apathetic. You know? Meaningless... but you know, I feel really blessed that I have like

my religion... they taught it to me well, that I could feel closer to it, you know." (Participant I)

This narrative exemplifies what McCormick et al. (2017) identify: spiritual formation providing frameworks for ultimate meaning that mediate relationships between adversity and mental health. The phrase "so many questions about life" captures the existential struggles trauma can create, whilst "gives meaning and purpose" demonstrates how spiritual frameworks address precisely what SAMHSA (2014) identifies as trauma's impact on spiritual well-being. Kessler's (2000) seven "gateways to the soul" provides interpretive framework: this student received "healthy forums led by responsible adults" for engaging spiritual dimensions.

Participants also described adults' role in practical guidance:

> I am still going to turn 18. My dad is 40 something. Whenever I need to make a bigger decision sort of than just a normal question, I turn to him because he can guide me about things which I do not know about. He could give me guidance that a person my age cannot give me. (Participant K)

> Before I was going to do the course, I was going to buy a place. I searched for older advice... he is better at dealing than me and my mother... even about the car, I did not know, so I told him come with me, but not all the time I need an adult, personally. (Participant B)

These exchanges demonstrate recognition that adults possess experiential knowledge valuable for navigating life transitions—what Manvelian et al. (2023) describe as a *secure base* function, providing confidence to navigate the world effectively.

The integration of these three themes illuminates how Salesian chaplaincy operationalizes trauma-informed holistic education. Students experiencing broken family trust (Theme 1) find alternative attachment figures in chaplains, coaches, and peers. Students carrying parental absence wounds and educational disappointments (Theme 2) receive meaning-making support addressing spiritual struggles that trauma creates. Students find in chaplaincy presence and faith communities (Theme 3) the consistent, non-judgmental accompaniment that facilitates earned security.

Integration with Literature: Trauma-Informed Holistic Education in Practice

These findings validate the integration of trauma-informed principles with holistic pedagogy. Participants' narratives demonstrate that students simultaneously carry wounds and demonstrate resilience, seek healing whilst maintaining hope, navigate disappointments whilst pursuing aspirations.

The redefinition of family (Theme 1) exemplifies Bath's (2008) validation that "healing relationships need not always involve psychotherapy" but occur "in the context of family, friendship, and other relationships." Participants, FM, K, A, and M demonstrate earned security development through alternative attachments—precisely what Jańczak (2024) describes. Their capacity to identify safe relationships and reorganize attachment accordingly represents what Ginwright (2018) terms strength-based orientation rather than deficit-focused pathologizing.

The parental absence narratives (Theme 2) illuminate what Davidson (2024) describes as trauma affecting ability (or willingness) to form relationships through creating mistrust since

"authority figures failed to keep them safe in the past, and they may view rules and consequences as punishment" (p.7). Yet these same narratives demonstrate resilience: M's reconciliation through communication, K2's recognition of parental care, J's developmental perspective-taking. This exemplifies van der Kolk's (2014) emphasis on narrative coherence as healing—making meaning from fragmented experiences.

The adult presence narratives (Theme 3) validate both Salesian spirituality's practical wisdom and contemporary research. Lydon's (2022) articulation that effectiveness stems from "being someone to them" rather than "doing something for them" aligns with Manvelian et al.'s (2023) finding that mentors serve as "safe haven" and "secure base" through consistent, attuned presence. K2's coach relationship demonstrates precisely this—his consistent checking in ("are you ok?"), his integration into her internal world (imagining his presence during solo training), and his ongoing availability even after the formal relationship ended all exemplify corrective attachment experiences.

The Salesian approach described by J—making faith accessible, integrating spiritual formation with relationship and joy, persistent but non-coercive presence—operationalizes trauma-informed collaboration principle whilst providing the family-style environment many students never experienced. The priest who validated S's questioning whilst emphasizing inherent worth demonstrates trauma-responsive spiritual care that addresses McCormick et al.'s (2017) finding that ACEs correlate with spiritual struggles requiring spiritual accompaniment.

These findings demonstrate that effective support for students with adverse childhood experiences requires integration of trauma-informed principles (safety, predictability, avoiding re-traumatization) with holistic pedagogy (addressing meaning, purpose, all dimensions of personhood) through a culturally embedded spiritual framework (Salesian accompaniment actualizing both contemporary neuroscience and practices carrying a wisdom-Tradition).

Implications and Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to literature on trauma-informed higher education, earned secure attachment, healing-centered engagement, and spiritually grounded student services by centering student voice. The findings validate theoretical claims whilst revealing lived complexity. The integration of participant narratives with trauma and attachment literature demonstrates students themselves articulate experiences aligning with research on trauma's relational disruption, attachment wounds' persistence versus transformation possibilities, trauma's existential dimensions, and healing through consistent relational presence.

The study demonstrates that Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three commonplaces framework—temporality, personal and social, and situation—provides a serious analytical structure for understanding trauma survivors' narratives. Participants' stories reveal how past experiences (temporality) continue shaping present realities, how individual wounds exist within social contexts (personal and social), and how students actively navigate toward futures of greater wholeness (situation).

Practical Implications

For educators and institutions serving students with complex developmental histories, findings suggest moving beyond reactive crisis

intervention toward proactive healing environment creation through; trauma-informed policies including, flexible attendance, multiple assessment formats, non-punitive discipline); faculty development (recognizing trauma manifestations, responding with curiosity rather than judgment); integrated services (coordinating academic, counseling, chaplaincy supports); and relational institutional culture (valuing relationships as central to educational mission, enabling consistent adult presence, facilitating peer connection).

The Salesian chaplaincy model demonstrates such integration practically. Other institutions might develop different specific practices whilst honoring integrative principles: seeing students as whole persons; providing consistent relational presence; creating safe environments; recognizing inherent worth; addressing meaning-making alongside academics.

Specifically, institutions should consider: establishing drop-in spaces where students can access non-judgmental adult presence without appointments; training faculty and staff in trauma-informed approaches emphasizing curiosity over judgment; creating peer support structures recognizing peers' healing potential; developing meaning-making opportunities through reflection groups, spiritual practices, or values exploration; and integrating rather than siloing academic and pastoral support services.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include focus on students voluntarily engaging chaplaincy at single institution; small sample size; cross-sectional design; and qualitative focus without quantitative outcomes.

The convenience sampling method and researcher's dual role as lecturer and researcher introduce potential selection bias and power dynamics, though mitigated through voluntary participation emphasis.

Future research should examine longitudinal experiences tracking students across multiple semesters or years; comparative effectiveness studies examining different trauma-informed holistic approaches; mechanisms linking specific relational qualities to particular outcomes, through trauma interventive programs; implementation challenges when institutionalizing trauma-informed holistic principles; and how such principles can permeate institutional cultures to incorporate specialized services to address trauma. Quantitative studies could examine prevalence of ACEs in vocational education populations and correlate trauma-informed environmental factors with student outcomes.

Conclusion

Students arrive at higher education carrying relational wounds, attachment disruptions, and spiritual struggles requiring more than traditional academic services. When institutions recognize this reality and respond with integrated trauma-informed holistic support, they fulfill education's highest calling: facilitating comprehensive human development and healing, preparing students for lives of meaning, connection, and flourishing.

These participants demonstrated profound wounds and remarkable resilience: seeking trust after betrayal, pursuing education despite disappointment, finding family among peers when biology failed, maintaining hope despite adversity. Their narratives validate that wounded students possess agency to navigate healing when provided environments combining safety with comprehensive support—exactly what integrated

trauma-informed holistic education, as embodied in Salesian chaplaincy, provides.

The question is not whether students have capacity for healing—these narratives demonstrate they do. The question is whether educational institutions will create conditions enabling that healing: relationships characterized by safety, consistency, and genuine care; environments validating all dimensions of personhood including spiritual; and accompaniment recognizing students as protagonists of their own journeys toward wholeness. As Lydon (2022) articulates, it is not what we do for students but who we are to them—being present, being consistent, being trustworthy, being witnesses to their stories of resilience and transformation.

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