

Institution: Canterbury Christ Church University		
Unit of Assessment: 23 - Education		
Title of case study: ICS23.02 Transforming Church school education and the teaching of Christianity in Religious Education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Trevor Cooling	Director of NICER (2010-17) (Now Emeritus Professor)	01/05/2010 - September 2020
Prof. Robert A. Bowie	Director of NICER (2018-)	01/09/2003 - present
Dr Sabina Hulbert	Senior Lecturer	01/06/2002 - present
Prof. Lynn Revell	Reader	01/09/1997 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Pedagogic research undertaken by the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) focuses on delivery of character education in all subject areas, and on the teaching of Religious Education (RE) in schools. This work has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed Church of England education policy, and the content and emphasis of its Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), which now takes an inclusive whole curriculum approach to a Church school education in its 4,700 schools; • Enabled school leaders to better meet the Church's expectation of a distinctly Christian curriculum; • Improved teaching and understanding of Christianity in schools, by underpinning the major curriculum resource <i>Understanding Christianity</i> (2016); • Influenced education beyond the Church of England through the revision of the <i>Religious Education Curriculum Directory</i>, the key Religious Education curriculum document for use in 2,200 English and Welsh Catholic schools; • Influenced approaches to Christian education internationally, informing multiple professional development programmes and resources (including USA, Australia, Russia, and Ukraine). 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><i>The Church School of the Future Review</i> (Church of England, 2012) identified the challenge of delivering inclusive education for all its 1.16million pupils, whilst remaining distinctly Christian. Engagement with Christianity in Church schools was largely siloed into collective worship and RE, yet the Church wanted faith at 'the heart of the curriculum' (p.5) in a way that was accessible for the whole school community. It also highlighted poor approaches to teaching Christianity in RE and recommended developing 'strategies for the improvement of teaching and learning' (p.17) and a 'new resource for teaching Christianity' (p.16). NICER responded to these recommendations for change through two research strands. The first relates to the development and testing of an inclusive pedagogic approach to Christian virtue character education, What if Learning (WIL). The second addresses weaknesses in teaching RE, using a pedagogy based on 'responsible hermeneutics' where pupils become 'virtuous readers', conscious both of 'intended meanings' and their own 'readerly' interpretations.</p> <p>What if Learning (WIL). WIL is a pedagogical approach where teachers frame their curriculum and lessons to prioritise Christian character virtues. It asks 'what if' (for instance) you could teach the Christian virtue of service to others through teaching how to be a good coach in PE? Between 2010-2020 NICER developed, refined, evaluated and reported on this approach in three stages of research. Firstly, conceptual research, instigated by Cooling, was undertaken in an intensive three-week series of seminars in May/June 2010, with Dr David I Smith of Calvin University (USA) and the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. It developed a model (WIL) that integrated Christian virtue character education into teaching and learning in all subjects [R.1]. This would allow a school to foster its Christian character in a way that could be more inclusive for all pupils and teachers, with 'Christian virtues' broadly being recognised as universally applicable, rather than adding Christian 'facts' to subjects.</p>		

Secondly, between 2012-2013 NICER undertook a multi-secondary school experimental intervention (in partnership with Liverpool Hope University) across 20 schools to refine and evaluate the efficacy of this model (**Cooling/Revell/Green/Morris**). This focused on teacher understanding and engagement with WIL, using interviews, lesson observations and focus groups. It demonstrated teachers could frame their lessons with concepts of Christian virtue - 'virtuous pedagogy' - across most subject areas, enabling them to relate the Christian character of the school to their curriculum area in a way they felt maintained their professional integrity **[R.2]**. Thirdly, a large-scale primary school study (2014-2016) investigated the effectiveness of this 'virtuous pedagogy' with an expanded focus to include pupil change (**Cooling/Hulbert**). Focusing on the virtue of hospitality it used a distinctive quantitative character survey assessment tool, developed by the team, to measure change in pupils' openness towards others (implicit and explicit intergroup attitudes); alongside qualitative teacher interviews and online surveys completed by 474 pupils and 198 teachers (pre, post and three months after intervention). It showed curriculum delivery through WIL resulted in a positive shift in attitudes, and that teaching the Christian character virtue of hospitality through the whole curriculum made children more open towards others **[R.3] [R.4]**. It also found that WIL was a workable model for schools to embed Christian character in all aspects of school life **[R.4]**. Additionally, both secondary and primary projects found that for the school community to embrace character virtue education within its culture and curriculum, whole-school leadership was vital **[R.2] [R.4]**.

'Responsible Hermeneutics' Pedagogy. Research by **Bowie** into delivery and framing of RE lessons (following from WIL) identified that Biblical texts are often decontextualised and interpreted without reference to wider narratives **[R.5] [R.6]**. This encouraged polarising argumentation and irreconcilable extremes, causing particular difficulties in teaching science and religion, and failing to address issues of responsible and irresponsible use of texts. **Bowie** recommended weaknesses should be structurally 'designed out' by increasing teachers' expertise and the practice of a more interpretative (hermeneutical) approach **[R.5]**. A more interpretative approach to the study of RE was also examined by **Cooling** (with Pett of RE Today). Applying the work of hermeneutic scholars A. Thiselton and K. Vanhoozer to classroom contexts **[R.7]**, they proposed a new pedagogically inclusive theological model of RE, drawing on 'responsible hermeneutics', for teaching Biblical texts. Pupils approach texts as both 'insider and outsider', recognising multi-layered interpretations depending on readerly perspective.

Summary of key findings/recommendations:

- *What if Learning* provided a workable model for a whole curriculum approach to virtue character education, enabling Church schools to be distinctly Christian whilst delivering positive outcomes for all. To achieve this, the role of school leadership is paramount.
- A more scholarly 'responsible hermeneutics' (interpretative) approach to teaching Christianity in RE allows all pupils to engage positively regardless of faith/worldview; helping pupils understand the views of others, mitigating against polarisation.

3. References to the research

R.1. Cooling, T. (2013) 'The distinctiveness of Christian learning in Church of England schools' *Anglican Church School Education: Moving Beyond the First Two Hundred Years* ed. Howard Worsley London: Bloomsbury [chapter]. CCCU on request.

R.2. Cooling, T.; Green, E.; Morris, A.; Revell, L.; (2016). *Christian faith in English church schools: research conversations with classroom teachers*. Bern, Switzerland Peter Lang. [Authored book]. Listed in REF2.

R.3. Hulbert, S.; Cooling, T.; Bowie, R. (2020) 'Measuring the Effectiveness of Virtuous Pedagogy: A Quantitative Study of the *What If Learning* Approach in Church of England Schools'. *Educ. Sci.* 10, 315. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110315> [Journal article]

R.4. Cooling, T.; Hulbert, S.; Thomas, C.; Gregory, P. (2016) *The Character Development Project Final Report* [Research Report] London: Church of England. CCCU on request.

R.5. Bowie, R. and Coles, R. (2018) 'We reap what we sew: perpetuating Biblical illiteracy in new English religious studies exams and the proof text binary question'. *British Journal of Religious Education.* 40:3, 277-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2018.1493270> [Journal article]. Listed in REF2.

R.6. Bowie, R. A. (2020) 'The collective consciousness of an RE department during curriculum change: scripture, representation, science, fear and anger', *Journal of Religious Education*. 68(3), pp. 305–318. doi: 10.1007/s40839-020-00111-9. [Journal article]

R.7. Pett, S. and Cooling, T. (2018) 'Understanding Christianity: exploring a hermeneutical pedagogy for teaching Christianity', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 40:3, 257-267, doi: 10.1080/01416200.2018.1493268. [Journal article]. Listed in REF2.

Quality statement:

R.3, R.5, R.6 and **R.7** were published in journals with established peer review processes and were all blind peer-reviewed. **R.1** is a chapter published in a book with rigorous peer review standards. **R2** was reviewed and accepted into a distinguished international series. **R4** was funded by the DfE and CofE. **R1** was submitted to REF 2014 and **R2, R5** and **R7** have been submitted in REF2 (REF2021).

Grants supporting the research include: **Cooling**, *The Influence of Christian Ethos on Teaching and Learning – Secondary Schools*. Sept 2011-Aug 2014. Sainsbury's Jerusalem Trust, Culham St Gabriel's Trust, Hinchley Charitable Trust, Hockerill Educational Foundation and Porticus. £190,000 and **Cooling**, *The Character Development Project*. May 2015 to Oct 2016. UK Department for Education and the Church of England. £52,000.

4. Details of the impact

NICER's research has been a 'foundation' for 'a transformation in Church School education' [**S.1**], becoming central to how the Church of England thinks about, delivers and evaluates education in its 4,700 schools (1.16million pupils). The CofE has now adopted a model of education that is both deeply Christian and wholly inclusive, embedding virtue character education throughout the whole curriculum. Additionally, research has resulted in significant improvements in RE pedagogy; underpinning a major new educational resource, *Understanding Christianity* (2016) used in over 5,500 schools; and influenced revision of the Religious Education Curriculum Directory, the key curriculum document for use in 2,200 Catholic schools in England and Wales. Beneficiaries include pupils, teachers, headteachers, Diocesan Directors of Education and Church school sector leaders, Catholic and Anglican, within the UK and internationally.

Changed Church of England education policy, which now takes an inclusive whole curriculum approach to a distinctly Christian education. WIL provided a model for teaching and learning for the CofE, underpinned by NICER's research, that had not previously been available [**S.1**]. It provided a framework to deliver a Christian education throughout the whole curriculum in a way that was relevant to all pupils and teachers. Evidence is provided by citations in key policy documentation and further confirmed by the CofE's most senior education officials. Its Chief Education Officer confirms that work by the Church of England's Education Office over the past six years has been significantly impacted by and 'flowed from Professor Trevor Cooling's seminal work *What If Learning?*' [**S.2**] This includes the development of the following key policy documentation:

The Fruit of the Spirit: A Church of England Discussion Paper on Character Education (2015). **Cooling** acted in an advisory capacity for the development of this paper, which signalled a change in direction of Church of England education policy to an inclusive model of character development. It recognises good practice in 'developing whole-school approaches to character education' and 'specific pedagogies that allow a wide range of curriculum subjects to become areas for deeper exploration of spiritual, ethical and cultural questions.' Examples from WIL are cited throughout, including illustrating how a wide range of subjects 'become vehicles for developing and reflecting on character traits' inspired by Christian virtues [**S.3**].

Leadership of Character Education: Developing virtues and celebrating Humans Flourishing in Schools (2017) [**S.4**] cited the WIL Character Development Project [**R.4**] and its emphasis on 'strong pedagogical leadership at senior level within the school' to develop 'virtue literacy' within all staff as the prompt for the report's focus on leadership [**R.4**]. It took a whole-school approach to character education, focusing on virtues developed in pupils and those modelled by staff.

Church of England Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good (2016) saw **Cooling** acting as advisor [S.5] for arguably the most influential document in Church of England education in the 21st century. It 'grew out of the approach to learning encapsulated in *What If Learning*' [S.1], and strongly reflected WIL's emphasis on formation of character and Church school ethos across the curriculum, to benefit all pupils irrespective of personal background or faith. The *Vision* is now implemented through the CofE's framework for Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS).

Changed the way in which a school's 'distinctive Christian vision' is evaluated by the Church of England. SIAMS is the evaluation framework used by all Church of England dioceses and the Methodist Church (updated 2013 and 2018). The Director of Education (Diocese of Worcester) and National Director of SIAMS (from June 2021) credits WIL as leading to 'a radical update of both the content and emphasis of SIAMS' [S.1], which now considers how a school's Christian vision is embodied through the whole curriculum, not just RE and collective worship. The School Character and SIAMS Development Manager for the CofE highlights the initial influence of WIL on the September 2013 SIAMS schedule, noting that the 'move of the schedule into the wider curriculum reflect[ed] the growing interest and impact of What If' [S.6a]. Specifically, he cites the following as underpinned by WIL: (i) the request that inspectors evaluate 'how well leaders promote the well-being of all learners, particularly their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, through a broad and distinctive curriculum in addition to worship and religious education'; (ii) the provision of grade descriptors for 'outstanding' stating that leaders should ensure 'the whole curriculum is informed by a distinctive Christian vision' [S.6a; S.6b]. In the current schedule, published in 2018, 'this idea has been taken further with elements of a distinctive Christian curriculum now [...] a more holistic expectation than that of the 2013 approach which looked for some explicit illustrations' [S.6a]. Consequently, the SIAMS inspection schedule is now underpinned by the 'expectation' that all subjects should be delivered in ways that promote and develop a school's Christian values and vision.

Enabled school leaders to better meet the expectations of the Church. WIL provided school leaders with a workable model to meet CofE expectations in relation to curriculum, and SIAMS with a benchmark of best practice. SIAMS' reports often make explicit reference to WIL [S.6a] and it was given as a 'model of what was being looked for' and '[t]here was almost an expectation that a school must have addressed this to achieve a good outcome or better' [S.6a]. A 2016 SIAMS' report for an 'outstanding' school noted, '[t]he use of the 'What if?' approach [...] results in thoughtful and confident discussion, spiritual growth and the school's recognised strengths in SMCS [social, moral, spiritual and cultural] growth' [S.7a]. One Headteacher wrote in correspondence to Cooling in 2020, '[w]e recently received an excellent SIAMS report, largely, I feel, due to the work undertaken on our WIL journey. [...] introducing the staff to the concept of using a Christian lens to frame our curriculum has changed teaching and learning in our school. Staff are planning and facilitating on an entirely different level.' [S.7b]

Improved teaching and learning in RE, through the major curriculum resource *Understanding Christianity: Text, Impact, Connection* (2016). Described as 'game-changing' by the Bishop of Ely [S.8a], *Understanding Christianity* (a Church of England Education project) represented a major intervention in the teaching of Christianity in RE, now being used in over 5,500 Church of England and Community schools [S.8b]. The editor, project leader and co-author for *Understanding Christianity* describes not only the impact of NICER's research on the resource, but highlights that he and **Cooling** jointly explained this in a subsequent publication: 'Cooling had a significant impact on the development of the *Understanding Christianity* resource [...] We applied the idea of "responsible hermeneutics" [...] [and t]ogether we published a paper in the BJRE [R.7] to articulate how this hermeneutical model underpins the resource' [S.8b]. A comprehensive independent evaluation of *Understanding Christianity* in 2020 found it to be 'a highly effective teaching resource for schools with teachers finding increased pupil attainment and progression' and being 'valued for its promotion of pupil agency and individual reflection.' It also resulted in 'considerable/noted improvement of textual understanding and knowledge' and significantly improved the ability of 'pupils to articulate, discuss and reflect on core theological concepts.' In addition, reflecting the inclusive pedagogy advocated in [R4-6] 'teachers and pupils found the

lessons to be inclusive with pupils from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds finding the lessons enjoyable and accessible.’ [S.8c].

Influenced revision of the Religious Education Curriculum Directory by the Catholic Education Service (CES). NICER’s research ‘significantly influenced’ [S.9] the substantial review (2018-2020) of the Religious Education Curriculum Directory (RECD), to be published in 2021. This is the key Catholic RE curriculum document that directs RE in the 2,200 English and Welsh Catholic schools. The RE Advisor to the CES states **Bowie’s** research (R.5 and R.6) influenced the revision of RECD in three ways. Firstly, the importance of a pedagogical approach that engages ‘with pupils hermeneutically such that pupils are able to engage with their learning at a personal level.’ Secondly, the critique of the way the Bible is commonly handled in schools ‘led to a repositioning of scriptural texts within the curriculum framework’ to be studied ‘using the methodologies outlined in the NICER research’. Thirdly, ‘wide-ranging’ research by NICER on taking a religiously literate approach to engaging with science, most recently reiterated in R.6, led to entire modules dealing with religious and scientific beliefs in the RECD [S.9].

Influenced approaches to Christian education internationally. Catholic and Protestant Church school sectors’ professional development programmes and resources have been informed by WIL. NICER’s research opened up ‘a far broader scope of Christian education’ than concentration on the more peripheral chapel and religious studies classes [S.10a]. WIL resources have been translated into Russian [S.11a] and serve as a basis for a series of ongoing regional workshops, for teachers and school leaders from evangelical schools in Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Russia [S.10b]. WIL has found particular resonance with Catholic and Anglican education communities in Australia and the USA. In the USA, WIL [R.2] underpinned the development of a teacher’s professional development resource [S.10b]. Additionally, it was the basis of a joint project by the Kuyers Institute (Calvin University) and The Colossian Forum, a Christian not-for-profit organisation, resulting in the development of a resource and seminar series supporting teachers and school leaders to explore the intersections of faith and science [S.10b]. WIL is promoted by the Anglican Diocese of Sydney (the largest Anglican diocese in Australia) via the Anglican Education Commission [S.11c]. This includes production of the ‘Cooling Video Kit’, five WIL-influenced films featuring **Cooling** to promote discussion for school staff [S.11d].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S.1 Testimonial, Director of Education (Diocese of Worcester) and National Director of SIAMS (from June 2021).

S.2 Testimonial, Chief Education Officer, Church of England.

S.3 PDF of *The Fruit of the Spirit: A Church of England Discussion Paper on Character Education* (2016). Cooling’s contribution on p. 22, WIL examples on pp. 10,16, & 18-19.

S.4 PDF of *Leadership in Character Education: Developing Virtues and Celebrating Human Flourishing in Schools* (2017). Executive Summary, pp. 9 & 50.

S.5 PDF *CofE Vision for Education: Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good* (2016). Cooling’s role detailed on p. 20.

S.6 (a) Email School Character and SIAMS Development Manager (b) PDF of 2013 SIAMS Schedule pp. 23 & 25.

S.7 (a) SIAMS inspection report, Sneinton St Stephen’s CofE Primary School (2016) (b) Letter from Headteacher St Michael’s CofE Primary School, Nottingham.

S.8 (a) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un_c1Qkwg4M 0:47 (b) Testimonial Project Leader, co-author and editor *Understanding Christianity* (c) PDF *Understanding Christianity Evaluation Study Report* (2020) pp. 2-3.

S.9 Testimonial, Religious Education Advisor to the Catholic Education Service.

S.10 Testimonials, (a) Chair of Anglican Education Commission, Sydney Diocese (b) Testimonial, Dr David I Smith, Calvin University, USA.

S.11 (a) Russian version of *What if Learning* website <https://achtoesli.mapxo.org/>

(b) https://calvin.edu/centers-institutes/kuyers-institute/files/Christian%20Faith%20in%20the%20Classroom.pdf?language_id=1

(c) <https://www.edcomm.org.au/publications/what-if-learning/>

(d) <https://www.edcomm.org.au/publications/cooling-video-kits/>