



Prayer Spaces in Schools

**Findings from a Qualitative  
and Quantitative Study into  
the impact of prayer spaces  
on the spiritual development  
of children and young people**

# Introduction

**Since 2007 prayer spaces in schools have enabled children and young people, of all faiths and none, to explore faith and spirituality in a safe, creative and interactive way.**

We have seen hundreds of thousands of children and young people explore their identity, process difficult emotions, forgive, say sorry, express their hopes and fears and discover prayer for the first time...but we wanted to understand more about the impact that prayer spaces are having on their spiritual development.

So, in June 2016 we commissioned Prof Julian Stern (Professor of Education and Religion at York St John University) to research and evaluate the contribution of prayer spaces to the spiritual development of children and young people.

Julian and his co-researcher, Rachael Shillitoe, used prior research into spirituality as relational consciousness as a basis for their research, thus focussing their evaluation into the impact of prayer spaces on pupils' relationships with:



The Self



Other people



The World



The Sacred or Divine

Two research tools were used:

**Interviews: 71** pupils and  
**15** teachers from **7** schools

**Questionnaires: 555** pupils  
aged **7-16** from **24** schools

The pupils surveyed were from a range of schools spread across England:

**Primary: 6** community and  
**11** with a religious foundation

**Secondary: 4** community and  
**3** with a religious foundation

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**"I felt relaxed and freed because I could let out all my emotions...on that day I had a bad day and I felt stressed but when I got to the prayer space I felt my self being calm for once." Pupil**

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**"I think it's a really good experience overall because it... took... [from] what was [a] normal... teacher-led RE lesson... for them to see God from a different perspective." Teacher**

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## Relationship with the Self

**“In terms of spiritual development, the biggest influence of prayer spaces appeared to be their influence on pupils’ relationships with themselves.” Authors**

When asked what ‘the best thing’ was about the prayer space, 88% of responses referred to the activities that were primarily or entirely self-reflective. Pupils enjoyed two key ways of self-reflecting:

The opportunity to engage in internal conversation with themselves;

*“I think it’s like a conversation that you’re having with yourself because it’s sort of saying one thing in one half of your mind and you’re saying it again in your other half which I quite like.” Pupil*

*“I was having a conversation in my head about what peace is and what forgiving is all about.” Pupil*

The opportunity to be comfortably alone with themselves;

*“I felt calm because it was silent.” Pupil*

*“I could really think about things whilst being partly occupied with something... like beads or the wooden balls, I wasn’t as distracted as I usually am.” Pupil*

The Authors state that “The ways in which prayer spaces can help pupils overcome stress is an important feature... ‘Destressing oneself’ was a common experience”.

*“It’s quite stressful school sometimes, so I thought that [the prayer space] was really relaxing and it ...helped me think about things that are more important than what I have been worrying about.” Pupil*

*“I felt relaxed and freed because I could let out all my emotions.” Pupil*

Pupils are asking searching questions about their identity and self-worth amidst constant pressure to present themselves via social media. Prayer spaces provide a much-needed oasis of calm and reflection in the busyness of the school day. They are contributing to pupils’ wellbeing, helping them to learn about themselves.

# 46%

Of the four categories used in this report 46% of responses refer to the self.

# 72%

When asked why the best activities were good 72% referred to themselves.



## Relationships with Other People

**“I was missing my grandma because she died and I was making peace with one of my friends because we shouted at each other.” Pupil**

After the Self, the next most popular theme for pupils was their relationships with other people. But their responses were about more than just thinking.

*“Mending relationships with others – forgiveness and saying sorry – was also a common theme.” Authors*

In prayer spaces, pupils thought about how their relationships can get broken and how they can be reconciled.

*“Forgiving someone who badly bullied me and...I was thinking about all the times I forgave my best friend when we got into arguments.” Pupil*

*“I was talking to my parents and telling them how sorry I was for all the bad things I’ve done.” Pupil*

Some pupils noticed how their time in the prayer space made a difference to their relationships.

*“I’ve got on better with my sister, not argued so much.” Pupil*

*“[It] helps you come into reality of ‘I’ve done something wrong: I need to apologise’, and it just helps you go home and face what you have done.” Pupil*

Prayer spaces clearly contribute to pupils’ social and emotional development. They are helping pupils to develop the character traits they need to relate appropriately to others.

One of the most common themes raised in the research was pupils thinking about those who have died.

*“I...notice the children...they all talk about lost family members.” Teacher*

*“I thought about people who I’ve lost who are in heaven, because it’s...a time to reflect on them...I don’t really do it when I am at home.” Pupil*

Prayer spaces provide an opportunity for pupils to acknowledge and process the emotions of grief in a culture that rarely provides permission or time for this.

# 35%

35% of pupils’ responses concerned relationships with other people.





## Relationship with the World

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*“The influence [of prayer spaces] was not just on individual relationships, but on community-building (at local and national and international levels) too.”* **Authors**

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The prayer spaces provided an outlet for pupils’ anxieties about the world.

*“Some people [in the prayer space] worried about...what Donald Trump is going to do and...about like the terrorist attacks in England.”* **Pupil**

*“[I was thinking about] how refugees had no home.”* **Pupil**

The prayer spaces provided a chance for appropriate emotional responses to events in the wider world.

*“I thought about those in other parts of the world that either do not have anything to eat or house to live in... It makes you feel quite grateful for what you have.”* **Pupil**

*“I was feeling mixed emotions like sad emotions, angry ones, but the main one was grief for people that aren’t as lucky as me.”* **Pupil**

The prayer spaces stirred pupils to respond actively to events in the world.

*“I was thinking about how I can help the whole of our community.”* **Pupil**

*“I pray that to god that he will bring peace to country’s like Syria.”* **Pupil**

The research shows that prayer spaces provide opportunities for pupils’ spiritual development in terms of their relationship with the wider world of people beyond their social circle – as well as national and international issues and events. They reinforce pupils’ awareness and sense of engagement as local and global citizens.





## Relationship with the Sacred and Divine

*"It was...holy like you are stepping on holy ground."* **Pupil**

The Authors state that "Prayer spaces provided distinctive and valued opportunities for pupils to develop their relationship with the sacred and divine." For those pupils who used the prayer spaces in this way, the majority mentioned God in the everyday context of a personal relationship in which they could speak to God and God would listen.

*"God was listening to my prayers."* **Pupil**

*"I've definitely heard, that they can actually sit still and they feel they can speak to God...and that maybe he's listening."* **Teacher**

Some pupils found this experience calming.

*"It's just like you and God...can relax and you can then just go out feeling more relaxed about things."* **Pupil**

*"It calmed me down and made me think about myself and thank God for making me."* **Pupil**

The research data affirmed the inclusivity of prayer spaces; the fact that pupils felt free to explore the sacred and divine without feeling coerced into any particular belief system or limited to a religious view of spirituality.

*"I think it was just to help you think about your beliefs whether you believe in the religion or whether you believe in anything really. I don't think it was trying to change [you]."* **Pupil**

*"In various ways, prayer spaces were valued for being inclusive, notably for recognising and being sensitive to the various religious and non-religious positions of pupils."* **Authors**

*"Pupils' reflections on prayer spaces also demonstrate that the prayer spaces can be understood in terms of existential cultures that transgresses religious, non-religious and spiritual boundaries."* **Authors**

# 11%

11% of responses overall mentioned the sacred and divine.

# 24%

24% of pupils mentioned the sacred and divine in response to 'these are the people I met or thought about in the prayer space'.

# 18%

18% of conversations mentioned the sacred or divine.

# Conclusion

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**“We can report that the evidence suggests that prayer space activities do indeed contribute to the spiritual development of children and young people.”** **Authors**

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In addition to the impact that prayer spaces have on how pupils relate to themselves, other people, the world and the sacred and divine, the researchers also identified that:

Prayer spaces are valued because pupils can choose how to engage;

*“By encouraging pupils’ agency, prayer spaces were better received than might be expected of many other engagements with religion and were therefore able to encourage spiritual development.”*

**Authors**

*“In the prayer space it’s about them owning what they are doing...They can choose to sit quietly and think, they can choose to do something creative or not. So it’s that freedom of engagement.”*

**Teacher**

Prayer spaces are valued for their physicality;

*“The physicality of the prayer activities appears to be not only popular, but an important feature of the pupils’ ‘spiritual experience’... [it makes] for a powerful learning environment...the objects used and the way the spaces are constructed had a significant bearing on pupils’ experiences.”* **Authors**

*“I liked the stone activity because I wanted to keep my thoughts and that way I was able to keep them.”* **Pupil**

Prayer spaces are contributing to pupils’ moral education;

*“Although the contribution of prayer spaces to moral education is not a feature of this evaluation, there is plenty of evidence of such education having taken place.”* **Authors**

*“I was thinking about forgiving and telling the truth.”* **Pupil**

*“I know that I can’t be that perfect and not make any mistakes...But I would really like to be a better person.”* **Pupil**

**This wide-ranging research project demonstrates that prayer spaces add value to pupils’ emotional wellbeing as well as their character, moral and citizenship education. They make a relevant and credible contribution to pupils’ spiritual development, and they empower pupils to reflect on their beliefs and values by using everyday objects to create a rich spiritual experience.**

Prayer Spaces in Schools is a resource hub for the growing network of practitioners running prayer spaces in their local schools. It is overseen by a small team who manage the website, encourage the sharing of resources and good practice and support training workshops and local networks.

**Contact us:**

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Find out more about our research project here:  
[www.prayerspacesinschools.com/research2017](http://www.prayerspacesinschools.com/research2017)

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**“It’s a safe space.” Teacher**

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**“I find it difficult to believe in prayer but it made me look carefully at me and my life so you don’t necessarily have to link it to religion you can just look at yourself.” Pupil**

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**“[The prayer space is] a kinaesthetic learning [experience]... that resonated really well with [pupils] because it allowed them to...engage with religion a lot more than they are able to just in a normal lesson in the classroom.” Teacher**

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Prayer Spaces in Schools is a project of 24-7 Prayer  
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