Engaging Children in Prayer

A Unit on Prayer by a Beginning Teacher
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I am a fourth year Bachelor of Education student at the Underdale campus of University of South Australia. Recently, I undertook my final five week practicum in a Year Four/Five class in a Catholic Primary school. During these five weeks my aim was to engage students in prayer, I wanted children to find prayer both enjoyable and relevant to them as young Catholics. Through this process, I also hoped to broaden the children’s perception of prayer beyond the formal ideas many young children hold. Hopefully, by sharing my positive experiences of engaging students in prayer, other beginning teachers like myself will be encouraged to involve children in a variety of prayer forms. The unit was exceptionally enjoyable for both my students and myself and with the help of a few fantastic resources, was remarkably simple to teach.

The context of my year 4/5 class is worth noting. I had expected that managing behaviour would affect the success of my unit on prayer as the class was renowned for not being receptive to external teachers. The class comprised of a number of children who were often quite disruptive including one child who often exhibited extreme behaviour. Amazingly, the entire class was so engrossed in the prayer activities that behavioural issues a problem. This obvious engagement in prayer by the children confirmed the success of my and convinced me that it’s good to teach hands on’ prayer despite classroom dynamics.

My own experience in Catholic schools led to my choice of topic. Throughout my schooling teachers taught prayer in a similar manner and as a consequence prayer became mundane. Until high school, when I was exposed to prayer through movement, my concept of prayer was limited to formal situations. I would have greatly benefited from exposure to a variety of prayer forms to enhance my relationship with God through enjoyable experiences. I believe that if I had a more comprehensive view of prayer as a child I would have prayed more frequently.

I conducted an initial survey that confirmed that like my childhood experience, students in my class had a very limited idea of what prayer was and where it could be used. Most children stressed that when they prayed they had to be silent and have their eyes closed (except church and school prayer) and that prayer occurred in set places. Only one child had a refreshing answer when she wrote that you can pray “wherever you are and when someone is bullying you”.

From this initial survey I developed a unit that aimed to engage students in prayer and in the process broaden their understanding of prayer. Below is a brief account of how I taught my unit.
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- **READING** - *Read Can I pray with my eyes open?* (Brown 1999) followed by class discussion/write up of somewhere new to pray. In partners, created a slide for PowerPoint presentation of book for the first reading at Mass on ‘Prayer.

- **POETRY** - Listened to a variety of prayers (humorous and serious) from *The Lion book of 1,000 prayers for children* (Rock 2003). Identified patterns in poetry. In partners given own prayer to identify pattern, write own prayer on anything using pattern, partner edited and published for use in Morning Prayer. Read *Grandpa’s Prayers of the Earth* (Wood 1999) to small group (early finishers).

- **LETTERS TO GOD** - Children wrote two letters, first one that could be thrown away at their discretion, second in their religion books, children also heard “Letter from A friend” (author unknown, online) and discussed who it was from and what it meant.

- **MEDITATION** - Three meditations were followed by journal writing where I wrote possible journal questions on the board for those who needed guidance, one meditation followed with the creation of clay symbol of peace (Peace for Life day) Meditations taken from *Prayer Strategies: A teacher’s Manual* (Nolen 1999).

- **MOVEMENT** - Children were given proforma from *Prayer Strategies: A teacher’s manual* (Nolen 1999). In groups of three created actions for an upbeat familiar “Stand up” (Michael Mangan) and were peer assessed.

- **MUSIC** - Sang and discussed upbeat songs including Top 40 songs (Pray- Tina Cousins, “Where is the love?” - Black Eyed Peas) We chose special songs for our Mass and worked out percussion, actions etc

- **MORNING PRAYER** - Drew up rosters so that a different pair of students prepared and hosted Morning Prayer daily. Hosts chose prayers (written by students in above poetry exercise), songs, and invited special prayers. Morning Prayer was organised in silent reading on day prior

- **CLASS MASS ON PRAYER** - Discussed Matthew 6:1-5. Mass run by students, all had at least one role. Incorporated modern songs, percussion, dance, PowerPoint presentation etc.

After the unit children were asked to complete an assessment sheet that asked what prayer was and where people could pray. Students were also asked to name one type of prayer that they participated well in and one they didn’t and to explain why. This assessment showed that by the end of the unit the whole class had a deep comprehension of prayer. Every child knew that they could pray anywhere in any manner and for any reason. The assessment was also useful to highlight students’ individual problems with particular prayer experiences that I hadn’t noted through observation.

Since engagement in prayer requires children to both enjoy prayer activities and feel close to God whilst involved in them, I also asked the children to complete two separate surveys. I was seeking prayer experiences that ranked highly in both surveys. The first survey asked children to rank their enjoyment of each different prayer form- putting a one next to the
most enjoyed prayer form, two next to their second enjoyed, down to their least enjoyed which was ninth. The children then completed the same process again, but this time they were questioned about which type of prayer made them feel closest to God. Students had a firm understanding of the surveys before they completed them and appeared to be genuine in their responses.

So how can we engage children in prayer?

Before discussing the survey results, I would like to share my learnings from observation alone. I learnt to engage children in prayer it is best to:

- Use modern music - Children hosting Morning Prayer chose upbeat songs and Top 40 songs (screened first for appropriateness) in preference to slower hymns every day. I found that children searched for greater meaning when using songs they loved.

- Respect children’s rights to privacy - children engaged far more in prayer when writing to God the first time as they had the right to put the letter in the bin, take it home etc. I noticed that the children discussed less personal issues in the second letter which was written in their religion books.

The children’s survey results showed that to engage children in prayer, teachers can:

- Provide a variety of prayer activities - although the surveys showed general trends, what was most striking was that each child had different responses, Each child ranked prayer experiences uniquely and each prayer form rated most engaging for at least one child. For a wide range of user friendly prayer forms, you will find Prayer strategies: A teacher’s manual (Nolen 1999) very useful.

- Link prayer to many different learning areas as prayer needn’t be confined to Religious Education lessons. I linked Prayer to English, The Arts (music, movement) and Technology. Given more time, prayer could have easily been linked to SOSE and children study how prayer is celebrated in other cultures.

- Link Religious Education to technology - Children ranked the lesson creating PowerPoint slides third most enjoyed and the fourth experience that brought them closest to God. It may seem surprising that children felt so close to God in a technology lesson, but this was due to them reading and presenting the words from, Can I pray with my eyes open? (Brown 1999), a brilliant resource.

- Give students ownership of prayer. Morning Prayer was ranked as the second most enjoyable prayer form. This new class interest in Morning Prayer was forged through the new responsibility students were given, the fact that they were reading prayers that the class had written, using modern songs but above all that they were ‘running the show’.
• **Give students complete ownership of the Mass.** The class Mass was also completely run by the children, was created by them and incorporated the different prayer experiences used in the classroom. Children ranked it a tied second for ‘Closest to God’. As Mass was a celebration of the prayer experiences we had studied, giving children ownership didn’t take additional time and was probably easier than a teacher-directed Mass.

• Use meditation, the most engaging prayer form overall. The children ranked meditation and journal writing as being the closest they felt to God, with meditation and art (shared ranking with Mass) as being second. The art/meditation activity also ranked first for what was most enjoyed and the meditation/journal activity ranked fifth. Reading the children’s journal reflections showed me how well children were engaging in the task. At the beginning, children worked from my questions but by the end were discussing in-depth images, feelings, and conversations they had with Jesus. I found that meditation works exceptionally well for children of all ability levels and that even the most disruptive children were on task during the activity.

• I found that the key to engaging students in prayer is providing them with a variety of prayer experiences and giving them ownership of prayer. Engaging students in prayer isn’t difficult or time consuming and is great fun for both students and teachers. I found that my own relationship with God was strengthened through sharing such positive prayer experiences with the children.

**References**
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(2000). *Letter from a Friend*  

**Music**

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