

Raised by This Place: Ritual Theater, Ecological Identity, and Spiritual Nurturing in Young Children

Katie Garcia, Teachers College, Columbia University, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This qualitative pilot study explores how young children articulate spiritual awareness and ecological connection through theater-based activities in a university laboratory preschool setting. Nine children aged four to five years participated in ten arts-based sessions over two months, engaging in embodied storytelling, poetry creation, terrarium building, and performance activities inspired by ecological and Indigenous narratives. Drawing on theories of children's spirituality, biophilia, and embodied learning, this research examines how theater serves as both a pedagogical tool and a sacred practice for young learners. Data collection employed participant observation, children's artistic artifacts, video documentation, and parent reflections. Findings revealed that children naturally expressed profound spiritual sensitivity through imaginative play, sensory engagement, and creative expression. Key spiritual and theatrical characteristics emerged throughout the activities, including presence, flow, imagination, ritual, empathy, and transformation. Theater activities, particularly embodied storytelling and improvisational drama, facilitated children's ability to explore perspectives beyond themselves, fostering empathy and environmental consciousness. This study affirms that creative arts, especially theater, nurture not only cognitive and artistic development but also spiritual and ecological awareness in early childhood, offering vital implications for holistic educational practices that honor children's innate capacity for wonder, connection, and care for the natural world.

Keywords: ritual theater, children's spirituality, ecological identity, biophilia, embodied learning

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

When I started the performing arts program in college at seventeen years old, learning about theater profoundly impacted my development as a young adult. Through theater, I was influenced by how I talk, think, interact, move my body, and walk the streets. It changed my being, my spiritual being. I started to see the subtleties of the world and wonder about myself and others. The awareness I gained through theater was physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Conte (2002), when discussing the gift of arts, states that art, music, dance, or drama are intrinsic to us all, to our spirit, and some people, unfortunately, lose this connection when they reach adulthood. She said that for some of us, “finding the bridge between our inner lives and our outer world requires a map” (p. 87). Throughout my own experience and first years of teaching drama to children and adolescents, the theater was not only a map but a compass to the inner world.

In her book *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life*, Miller (2021) refers to spirituality as “something each of us is born with the capacity to experience” (p. 58), which is innate and intrinsic. In her essay *A Vision of Schools With Spirit*, Lantieri (2002) states that spirituality “encompasses a realm of human life that is nonjudgmental and integrated. It is about belonging and connectedness, meaning and purpose” (p. 7). Through learning and teaching theater, I made sense of myself and the world around me. I could foster my spirituality and started to advocate for children's spirituality through the arts.

My journey has guided me to ask how engagement with theater activities encourages and articulates children's connection to nature and their spiritual selves, and what role embodied storytelling plays in fostering spiritual and ecological awareness in children. This research explores how young children articulate spiritual awareness and ecological connection through improvisational theater, poetry, and embodied storytelling activities.

Related Literature

Spirituality in Early Childhood

Spirituality in young children is not separate from daily life; it arises naturally from their intrinsic curiosity and connections to the world around them. Champagne (2003) similarly argues that children's spirituality manifests concretely through daily activities and sensory experiences, describing children's spirituality as sensitive, relational, and existential modes of being expressed naturally through play, exploration, and creative expression (Champagne, 2003; Littleton & Sole, 2025).

Miller (2015) notes that spirituality is a biological predisposition that children naturally embody, supporting Hay and Nye (2006) assertion that spiritual expression is a “natural predisposition” or “biological reality.” Hart (2010) adds that spirituality is a worldview, developmental process, and continuous inquiry into self-understanding, purpose, and meaning.

In alignment with Coles (1991), Miller (2015), Hay and Nye (2006), Champagne (2003), and Harris (2007), the literature consistently underscores children's natural predisposition toward spiritual expression. Children spontaneously articulate deep spiritual and existential connections through play, creative arts, and embodied activities. In this research analysis, I will draw connections on how children express these innate spiritual capacities, focusing mainly on their interactions with nature and artistic experiences within theater-based activities.

Arts, Spirituality, and Resilience in Educational Settings

Lantieri's vision for spiritually supportive schools highlights the arts as central to spiritual and emotional development. It emphasizes the importance of creative arts in enlarging children's abilities to employ their intuition, imagination, and creativity—qualities intimately connected to spiritual intelligence (Lantieri, 2002).

Carlsson-Paige (2002) emphasizes that “children's capacities for meaning-making through drawing, drama, music, social exchange, and inner exploration” are essential to spiritual development yet often neglected in school curricula (p. 23). For children, engaging creatively in art and drama is fundamentally spiritual: a way to process, reflect, and express their experiences. Similarly, Brendtro and Brokenleg (2002) argue that educational environments that nurture a sense of belonging and interconnectedness are crucial aspects of children's spiritual well-being.

Theater, arts, and nature collectively offer children powerful avenues to explore their spiritual and ecological selves. Children's artistic expressions—through drama, poetry, drawing, and embodied storytelling—are deeply resonant spiritual practices. Conte (2002) poignantly summarizes that “artistic experiences often draw out feelings and awareness in unexpected ways” (p. 80), becoming crucial for children's spiritual and ecological development.

Spiritual Development and Awareness Through Theater

Theater creates spaces for children to explore their spiritual selves through embodied learning and artistic expression. Boal (1995) defines theater as “the capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action and activity... to imagine variations of his action and to study alternatives” (p. 13). Theater thus becomes a metacognitive practice, prompting awareness, reflection, and spiritual insight through embodied experience.

Artaud (2024) complements this by illustrating theater's potential to unearth internal emotional truths, serving as a powerful medium for revealing the inherent spiritual dimensions of human experience. Drama also provides a disciplined, calm atmosphere, cultivating emotional intelligence, social-emotional skills, and spiritual sensitivity, which are crucial for healthy spiritual development (Hough & Hough, 2012).

Through theater and dramatic arts, children enter imaginative worlds that significantly influence their emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development. Engaging in embodied artistic expression allows children to navigate personal truths, cultivate emotional intelligence, and deepen their spiritual sensitivity. As emphasized by Sole and Littleton (2023), “when we involve ourselves in the visual arts, music, drama, and literature, we enter artistic and aesthetic realms of separate realities—our own worldplay—that mirrors children's imagining and creating worlds of wonder” (p. 63). Theater thus supports young children in building meaningful connections, expanding self-awareness, and nurturing an intrinsic capacity for wonder.

Biophilia, Ecological Theater, and Embodied Learning

Ecological awareness and spirituality in young children find strong theoretical foundations in biophilia—the innate human affinity for nature. Barbiero and Berto (2021) articulate biophilia as a psychological orientation toward life, describing it as “being attracted to all that is alive

and vital.” If children are given proper conditions, they cultivate four active elements of biophilia: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge, traits intrinsically linked to spiritual awareness and ecological empathy.

This biophilic perspective aligns closely with ecological theater practices that engage children through embodied learning. Kimmerer (2013) emphasizes the indigenous principle of reciprocity—fostering gratitude and care toward the natural world as vital components of spiritual and ecological consciousness. Abram (2017) underscores the role of embodied cognition in ecological awareness, suggesting the human body acts as a living bridge connecting inner spiritual worlds with external natural landscapes. Roerden (2002) echoes this sentiment when she refers to David Orr's concept of “embodied knowing,” uniting mind, spirit, emotions, and physical selves, fostering a spiritual connection to nature through experiential learning. “It is a deeper knowledge than intellectual understanding. It is more akin to instinct or intuition” (p. 58). She later referred to Mitchell Thomoashow's concept of “ecological identity,” suggesting spiritual development occurs as children deepen awareness of their inherent connections to nature through meaningful interactions and embodied experiences in natural settings. Lastly, in her work through ecological theater, Osnes (2018) highlights performance art as a medium that effectively engages communities and individuals with ecological themes through embodied dramatic metaphors.

Drawing these theories together provides a cohesive lens to interpret children's spiritual expressions and ecological connections observed through theater practices. Ecological consciousness emerges naturally in young children when their spiritual curiosity interacts with embodied artistic engagements. As Louv (2008) shares, nature often invites children to “contemplate infinity and eternity” (p. 98), fostering spiritual curiosity and ecological understanding. Brendtro and Brokenleg (2002) emphasize that spiritual belonging involves relationships with nature and the community, thus illustrating the natural interconnectedness of ecological awareness, spiritual growth, and artistic expression in young children.

Theoretical Framework

In developing the activities for this research, I intentionally integrated theatrical and spiritual characteristics that honor the body's wisdom, presence, and creative impulse. The following key characteristics, drawn from theatrical and spiritual literature, guided the design and observation of children's experiences throughout this study.

1. **Presence (Here-and-Now or Hic et Nunc):** A real-time-only, vivid experience and practice of being fully engaged and attentive in the moment, fostering awareness and openness (Brook, 2019; Hay & Nye, 2006).
2. **Flow:** A state of complete immersion in an activity where action and awareness merge, bringing joy and optimal performance. Loss of self-consciousness, which a child might experience in almost any activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).
3. **Imagination:** The ability to creatively visualize and express ideas beyond reality is essential for storytelling and personal narrative exploration. For Artaud, to imagine is to “question our assumptions about reality.” That is where we shape reality, and Boal will say that theater allows us to imagine the future and explore possibilities. It is a sacred act for a child (Artaud, 2024; Boal, 1995; Hay & Nye, 2006).
4. **Ritual:** Turner (1982) describes ritual as a liminal process that enables individuals and communities to step outside ordinary reality and enter spaces of transformation and reflection. It is a standardized act that may be secular and sacred (Schechner, 2004).

5. **Empathy (Catharsis):** An emotional resonance with others' experiences, leading to understanding and release, both through performance and interpersonal connection (Aristotle, 1997).
6. **Play:** Joyful, spontaneous play is imbued with more profound meaning and a connection to the sacred and the communal (Huizinga, 2009). It is our “divine right and the foundation on which intelligence and creativity grow” (Hart, 2010).
7. **Embodiment:** The awareness and expression of body-mind unity, where sensations and actions are deeply connected to meaning and experience (Abram, 2017; Damasio, 2005).
8. **Celebration:** A communal act of honoring milestones and experiences with reverence and joy, fostering shared meaning, commonly seen in Indigenous traditions (Schechner, 2004).
9. **Transformation:** A process of profound change in which individuals or groups shift perception and being, often through storytelling and enactment (Artaud, 2024; Boal, 2013). Kimmerer (2013) speaks to ecological and relational transformation through reciprocity with nature.
10. **Communion:** Deep relational experiences where individuals connect to each other and to the world, fostering reciprocity and mutual care (Kimmerer, 2013; Osnes, 2018).

Later in the analysis, we will understand how/if those characteristics manifested in children's experiences throughout the activities.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative pilot study employed a sample of convenience (Etikan et al., 2015), focusing on a university-based laboratory preschool where I had been working as a part-time assistant teacher for six months before and during the research. My dual role positioned me as a participant-observer, allowing for sustained daily contact with the children and facilitating weekly theater explorations. Although I had access to both classrooms, the study focused on the class with which I had the most consistent engagement, selected for the practical convenience of integrating the research activities into their existing schedule. The class consisted of nine children between four and five years old (Table 1).

The study was granted approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Teachers College, Columbia University. Before data collection commenced, written consent was obtained from the school director and the parents of all participating children. The research was structured around a scope and sequence of ten arts-based sessions conducted over two months, each lasting between 30 minutes and one hour.

Research Questions

The following questions guided my study:

1. How does engagement with theater activities encourage preschool children to explore and articulate their connection with nature and spiritual awareness?
2. What role does embodied storytelling play in fostering spiritual awareness and ecological empathy in preschoolers?

Table 1
Participants Information

Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Cultural Background
Kitty	4 years, 6 months	Female	Colombian Heritage
Pebble	4 years, 6 months	Male	Italian Nigerian Heritage
Palm	4 years, 7 months	Female	South Korean American Heritage
Bunny	4 years, 9 months	Male	England American Heritage
Apple	4 years, 5 months	Female	Argentinian Israeli Heritage
Butterfly	4 years, 9 months	Female	Puerto-Rican and Dominican-Republic Heritage
Beetle	4 years, 4 months	Male	Russian Heritage
Lion	4 years, 9 months	Female	Arabian Heritage
Echo	5 years, 1 month	Male	Argentinian Taiwanese Heritage

Note: The Children's names were chosen based on how they expressed themselves throughout the research, demonstrating aspects of and interest in those natural elements.

Description of Activities

The activities in this study were designed as a progressive sequence of embodied, creative, and reflective experiences, each building on the last to foster children's ecological awareness and spiritual expression. Inspired by the relationship between theater and spirituality, I intentionally chose activities and materials that offered multimodal artistic experiences, enabling children to express themselves not only through drama but also through visual arts, movement, music, and storytelling. My selections were shaped by my experience as a theater artist and educator and my desire to invite children into meaningful explorations of nature and belonging. Although books such as *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) and *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram (2017) are not written for children, they were instrumental in shaping the conceptual foundation of this work.

Notably, the process of moving through these activities was not only designed for children's learning but also became a process of discovery for me. Each session became part of a shared genesis of our work together, allowing me to observe, listen, and understand how the children naturally connected to these themes. Their responses continuously informed and refined the work, making the sequence an evolving, co-created experience.

Embodied Storytelling

Children explored ecological narratives and books such as *Skywoman Falling*, *The Great Kapok Tree*, and *The Other Way To Listen*, embodying elements of the stories through

movement, tableaux, and improvisation. Children were also invited to imagine themselves as other beings, such as trees, and consider how their perspectives would change. This allowed them to connect to the stories and the land they represented physically, supporting their embodied experiences and nature connections through mindful listening and environmental identity (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1

Kitty Embodied Her Version of a Tree



Figure 2

Beetle Embodied Going Down the Slide, His Favorite Memory of Being Outside



Figure 3
Skywoman Embodied Storytelling



Terrarium Creation

A miniature ecosystem built in a glass container to represent the interdependence of nature (Figure 4). Children created terrariums to represent interconnected ecosystems. These served as both artistic and symbolic representations of care and reciprocity. The activity included conversations on what elements give life and how ecosystems support one another.

Figure 4
Terrarium's Process



Sacred Jars

Inspired by Deborah Marcero's book *In a Jar*, which tells the story of Llewellyn, a collector of memories, feelings, and experiences through natural elements (rainbows, feathers, or the sound

of the ocean) and his journey with his friend Evely, children collected natural elements that carried personal or sensory significance. These sacred jars became tangible representations of gratitude, family memories, and emotional grounding (Figure 5).

Poetry Creation

The title of the research, *Raised by This Place*, is inspired by Kimmerer (2013). In the chapter “The Gift of Strawberries” in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she begins with a reflection on her childhood:

I was raised by strawberries, fields of them. Not to exclude the maples, hemlocks, white pines, goldenrod, asters, violets, and mosses of upstate New York, but it was the wild strawberries, beneath dewy leaves on an almost-summer morning, who gave me my sense of the world, my place in it. (p. 22)

Through nature and through place, she found a sense of her world, and wondering what places raised us adds another layer to spiritual questions such as “Who am I?” We could also ask: “What/Who raised me?” “What role do nature and place have in my sense of the world?”

Children composed poems following a prompt (Appendix), reflecting on sensory memories and personal connections to their environment, culture, and family. Individually, I recalled everything they shared about their favorite places, cultures, languages, and loved ones. I asked what they could see, hear, or touch in their home place/home/country; what they could smell or taste from the place they come from, their favorite season and natural elements they feel connected to, and what the feeling is about somewhere or someone.

Figure 5
Sacred Jars



Performance

The final presentation, *Raised by This Place*, integrated all the children's creative outputs. We displayed their jars, terrariums, and drawings as part of the scenario, and they performed their favorite part of their poems for their loved ones.

Findings

Throughout the sessions, children's voices and embodied responses offered profound insights into their relationships with nature, spirituality, and community. The following observations reflect their spontaneous expressions and moments of engagement. This section is divided according to the main themes described in the analysis.

Nature Connection

The children's experiences throughout the research revealed a profound and authentic connection with nature, expressed through emotions, storytelling, and embodied creativity. Their relationship with the natural world emerged as curiosity and as an expression of care, wonder, and “relational consciousness”—what Hay and Nye (2006) describes as an intense awareness of relatedness to nature, others, God, or self.

Emotions and Feelings Toward Nature

Children consistently expressed positive emotional states when engaging in nature-based and nature-themed activities. Calmness, joy, and fascination were evident as they worked with natural elements and embodied ecological narratives. When making her terrarium, Butterfly shared feeling “calm... because I feel the deep breath in the rainforest,” while Bunny, when asked about his favorite memory of being outside, associated happiness with playing on an ice lake. When I asked him to draw this memory, Bunny was wholly immersed in the activity, drawing the lines of the lake while sharing what he likes to do in the park (See Figure 6). He later drew a turtle as his connection to nature, linking animals and natural environments to emotional well-being.

Figure 6

Bunny's Favorite Memory of Being Outside



Spiritual Awareness

Spirituality is an ordinary aspect of children's lives. Throughout the research, children demonstrated moments of wonder, awe, emotional depth, and spiritual imagination. These experiences reflect what Champagne (2003) describes as children's sensitive, relational, and existential modes of being, expressed through sensory engagement, emotional states, and creative play. Their natural ability to dwell in the present moment, fully immersed in activities, revealed key spiritual and theatrical characteristics such as presence, flow, and embodiment.

Spiritual Imagination

Children's imaginative narratives served as powerful expressions of spiritual connection. In poetry, this imaginative spirituality became even more vivid. When I shared my own version of "I Was Raised By This Place," I asked them, after hearing my poem, where they think I was raised. Most of them gave me the factual answer: Brazil. However, Kitty answered, "In the sunset," suggesting a deep symbolic connection, likely recalling our initial meeting where I told them that my first memory of being outside was when I saw the sunset in the Mountain Andes, Chile, linking place, memory, and identity in a poetic, spiritual gesture.

In their own poems, children consistently drew on magical, natural, and familial imagery. Apple wrote of being "raised by dogs and unicorns," Kitty by "trees that hug me and dance with me," Butterfly by "the buzz of the bees and by my grandma howling like a wolf," and Echo by "the sound of the sea and my fast heartbeats." These metaphors demonstrate the ability to use imaginative play and language as sacred tools for expressing their sense of belonging, wonder, and love for the world—aligning with Artaud's (2024) and Boal's (2013) vision of imagination as a force to question and reshape reality.

Nature and Spirituality

Nature emerged not only as a space for play but as a spiritual presence in the children's lives. The terrarium activity became a miniature stage for ecological imagination. Bunny envisioned creating "yogurt and honey," Palm wished to touch everything if she could live inside the terrarium, and Lion imagined magical trees and jaguars. This reflects what Roerden (2002) previously mentioned, which describes embodied ecological literacy and nature as a healer and teacher that nurtures and invites care.

When I asked Beetle to draw his poem, he drew the Earth inside of a heart (Figure 7), and one of his poem's line says, "I was raised by Earth and Mars." When reading Roerden's (2002) essay "Lessons of the wild," I encountered the following quote: "The earth protects us, nurtures us, tells us about the shape of our heart, and we in kind are called to do the same for the earth" (p. 63). In his own way, with all his wisdom, Beetle said the same thing, showing his love and connection to Earth.

When drawing her connection to nature (Figure 8), Kitty drew symbolic layers called "maternity" (we later found out her mother was pregnant, and this topic came up at different times), connecting her to a tree, which was connected to water. She referred to maternity as "something that connects to water," highlighting an intuitive understanding of nature's nurturing and maternal dimensions while associating her own personal experience with it. The children's descriptions and artistic expressions show how nature is embedded in their spiritual development as a source of meaning, development, identity, calmness, and joy.

Figure 7*Beetle's Drawing of His Poem***Figure 8***Kitty's Connection to Nature*

Cultural Awareness & Places

The children's expressions of cultural identity, familial roots, and connections to place revealed the deep interplay between environment, memory, and spiritual belonging. Through storytelling, artistic expression, and embodied play, they articulated a sense of self that was strongly anchored in family relationships, language, and place-based memories.

Favorite Places and Family

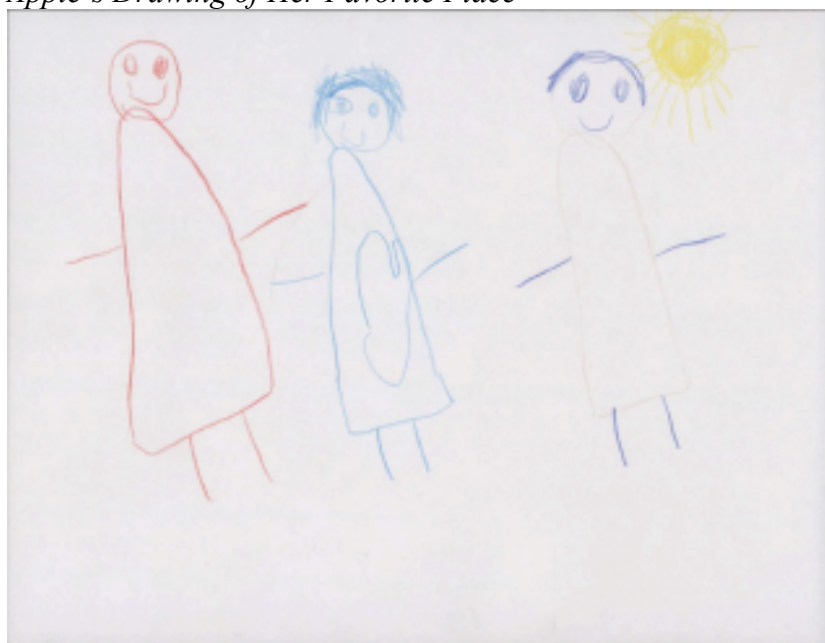
Family emerged as the foundation of place-based identity and emotional grounding. Apple's response to drawing her favorite place (Figure 9)—her family—reflected familial relationships' profound emotional security, with language reinforcing that bond. She preferred speaking Spanish because it is the language she uses with her mother, highlighting language as both a cultural and spiritual connection.

Pebble's memories of Italy, mainly connected to his mother and grandmother, reveal how geography, family, and personal narrative are intertwined. Similarly, Kitty spoke fondly of her *abuelos* and *primas* in Colombia, expressing how family memories and home places are inseparable. Butterfly associated special places with her grandmother's house, recalling pool activities that linked joy, family, and place.

Children's answers to questions about origins further illustrated their spiritual depth and familial grounding. Echo's answer, "In my mother's tummy," and Beetle's response, "My grandma's house," to the question "Where are you from?" emphasized that their sense of self is firmly rooted in family and origin stories, aligning with the existential and relational spiritual modes described by Champagne (2003).

Figure 9

Apple's Drawing of Her Favorite Place



Embodied Learning & Theater

As mentioned in the introduction, theater could serve as a compass to our inner selves, while it can also be a map when we lose our way in adulthood (Conte, 2002). This compass can offer young children pathways to express emotions, memories, and imaginative worlds through their bodies and voices.

Nature and Theater

Theater provided a stage for embodied ecological connection. During the terrarium activity, children imagined themselves inside the ecosystem. Pebble imagined magical animals coming alive when it rained. Lion embodied fast, playful movements, comparing herself to “Sonic,” indicating imaginative thinking and full-body participation in constructing ecological scenarios.

Outdoor moments also revealed embodied connection. At the playground, Kitty immersed herself in role-playing a wild cat, maintaining a full physical commitment to feline movements for an extended period, demonstrating body awareness and imaginative embodiment.

Role-play activities further supported embodied learning. When asked to become a tree in the rainforest, Lion responded to Beetle's playful inquiry, reminding him: “*I am a tree; trees don't walk,*” before continuing to speak in character. This demonstrated both her imaginative presence and a clear understanding of her role, integrating environmental knowledge through embodiment.

Spirituality and Theater

Theater also served as a spiritual practice, enabling children to express awe, gratitude, and interconnectedness. During the reading of *The Great Kapok Tree*, children took on the perspectives of animals pleading for the preservation of their homes, engaging in empathetic and moral reflection through dramatic play.

The embodied storytelling of the Skywoman narrative exemplified how theater serves as an aesthetic and spiritual experience, deeply resonant with children's natural ways of learning and being. As Ho (2020) suggests, aesthetic experiences are fundamental to children's development, nurturing their appreciation for life and nature while fostering emotional expression and decision-making. In this context, drama improvisation allowed the children not only to listen but also to actively participate in creation, using their senses, movement, and spontaneity to connect with the story and with each other. This reinforces Harris' (2007) observation that young children prioritize immediate, meaningful present experiences, encountering these moments with wonder and imagination. The joy, excitement, and creative autonomy observed during the Skywoman activity revealed that theater can become an embodied spiritual practice where children are affectively transformed by engaging with stories that connect them to nature, community, and their inner selves.

Poetry creation sessions further illustrated this intersection of theater, embodiment, and spirituality. Beetle's poem about his grandmother's steak—recalling the taste, smell, and emotion associated with family memory—revealed how sensory and emotional experiences are stored and expressed through creative art. Children's poetry lines such as “I was raised by the bugs, and the ocean” (Bunny) and “I was raised by the jaguar, snakes, and butterflies” (Butterfly) poetically embodied the animistic and relational worldview fostered through theater. Children accessed deeper layers of relational spirituality through gestures, sounds, and words. They embodied storytelling, demonstrating that theater is a performance and a profound act of connection, transformation, and meaning-making.

Conclusion

Through a rich tapestry of embodied storytelling, poetic expression, and theater, this inquiry confirmed that young children carry profound spiritual sensitivity and natural biophilic tendencies within them. These qualities emerged not in isolated moments but in their everyday play, narratives, and artistic creations, aligning with the work of Hay and Nye (2006) and Harris (2007), who describe children's spirituality as relational, lived, and expressed through wonder, awe, and connectedness.

The children's spiritual awareness was revealed through moments of presence, flow, and imagination—core spiritual development and theatrical practice characteristics. As theorists like Csikszentmihalyi (2014) suggest, flow states facilitate deep learning and connection. These states were consistently observed in the children's joyful immersion in creative tasks, such as crafting terrariums and sacred jars, drawing, performing Skywoman's story, and writing poems that integrated family, nature, and place. Their imaginative creations and embodied expressions echoed Artaud's vision of theater as a space for spiritual and visceral truth (Artaud, 2024) and Boal's understanding of theater as a metacognitive tool for reflection, transformation, and empowerment (Boal, 2013).

Theater served as both ritual and pedagogy, offering a liminal space where children could explore belonging, reciprocity, and identity. Turner's (1982) concept of theater as ritualistic liminality was evident in the children's ability to step into mythic narratives and reimagine their relationships with the Earth and each other. Through embodied practices such as Image Theatre and storytelling, the children articulated ecological identity (Roerden, 2002) and demonstrated relational spirituality (Hay & Nye, 2006), responding to the land and their cultural roots with reverence and joy.

The findings illuminated key spiritual and theatrical characteristics at play:

- *Presence and mindfulness* were observed in quiet moments of reflection and attentive listening during meetings, embodied activities, and the final presentation.
- *Flow and joyful immersion* are seen in their complete absorption of creative tasks, as observed in videos, rehearsal, drawing, storytelling, and final presentation.
- *Ritualistic* moments were created during research. For example, every time before children's rehearsal and the final performance, the kids and I took three deep breaths while moving our hands like a rainbow as a way to find grounding and presence.
- *Imagination, Play, and Embodiment* are expressed through symbolic storytelling and artistic abstraction, as in spiritual imagination and theater activities.
- *Reciprocity and empathy* are reflected in their narratives of care for family and nature and in improvisational scenes in our theater exploration. For instance, when some kids improvised animals and beings in a magical forest on our imaginary stage, other kids played the audience. When asked how they felt watching the improvisation, Kitty said, "I feel I was loved because F. (a girl from another class) makes me feel very happy," fully expressing a cathartic moment.
- *Transformation* occurred as children started to reflect on their role as part of nature, understand themselves, and build confidence in performance, echoing Boal's transformative theater practices.
- *Celebration and communion* through shared performances and collective artistic creation.

Parents' reflections further reinforced these observations, noting children's increased emotional expression, creative confidence, and environmental consciousness. Through loved ones' reflections, it was noted that children were expanding that experience beyond the classroom, adding more artistic expression, such as Kitty, who created a song about her "I Was Raised By This Place" poem. The children's poetic responses and embodied practices demonstrated how theater can scaffold cognitive and artistic development and spiritual and ecological consciousness, echoing Bentley's (2013) assertion that artistic inquiry nurtures innovative cognitive and emotional development in young learners.

Ultimately, this research affirms that creative arts, especially theater, are not merely a pedagogical tool but a sacred practice that nurtures the mind, body, spirit, and ecological self. In an era marked by disconnection from nature (Louv, 2008), this work underscores the importance of creative, embodied, and relational practices in education. By inviting children to imagine, play, and connect, we foster the seeds of ecological empathy, spiritual resilience, and a more profound sense of belonging to the Earth and each other.

As educators and artists, our role is to continue cultivating these sacred spaces of wonder and inquiry, enabling future generations to grow in knowledge and wisdom and care for the world they will inherit. In the appendix, I have included the prompts and activities used throughout this research, which you are welcome to adapt to your own community and context. May these tools help you nurture imagination, connection, and reverence in the children you teach.

Acknowledgements

To explore the creative work, listen to children's poems and educational resources developed from this research, visit the project website: www.raisedbythisplace.com

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

References

- Abram, D. (2017). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage Books.
- Aristotle. (1997). *Aristotle's Poetics* (G. Whalley, Trans.; J. Baxter & P. Atherton, Eds.). McGill-Queen's University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C. E.)
- Artaud, A. (2024). *The Theatre and its Double* (M. Taylor-Batty, Ed.; 1st edition). Methuen Drama.
- Barbiero, G., & Berto, R. (2021). Biophilia as Evolutionary Adaptation: An Onto- and Phylogenetic Framework for Biophilic Design. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 700709.
- Bentley, D. F. (2013). *Everyday Artists: Inquiry and Creativity in the Early Childhood Classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Boal, A. (1995). *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (A. Jackson, Tran.). Routledge.
- Boal, A. (2013). *Theatre of the Oppressed* (C. A. McBride, Tran.; Tcg ed. edition). Theatre Communications Group.
- Brendtro, L., & Brokenleg, M. (2002). The Circle of Courage: Children as Sacred Beings. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 39–52). Beacon Press.
- Brook, P. (2019). *The Empty Space*. Nick Hern Books.
- Carlsson-Paige, N. (2002). Nurturing Meaningful Connections with Young Children. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp 21–38). Beacon Press.
- Champagne, E. (2003). Being a Child, a Spiritual Child. *International Journal of Childrens Spirituality, 8*, 43–53.
- Coles, R. (1991). *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Reprint edition). Mariner Books.
- Conte, Z. (2002). The Gift of the Arts. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 77–89). Beacon Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8>
- Damasio, A. (2005). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Penguin Books.
- Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2015). Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1–4.

- Harris, K. I. (2007). Re-conceptualizing spirituality in the light of educating young children. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 12(3), 263–275.
- Hart, P. T. (2010). *The Secret Spiritual World of Children: The Breakthrough Discovery that Profoundly Alters Our Conventional View of Children's Mystical Experiences* (Kindle Edition). New World Library.
- Hay, D., & Nye, R. (2006). *The spirit of the child* (Revised ed.). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Ho, K. L. C. (2020). Who has the power? A reflection on teaching drama improvisation with young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 18(1), 73–83.
- Hough, B., & Hough, S. (2012). The Play Was Always the Thing: Drama's Effect on Brain Function. *Psychology*, 03(06), 454–456.
- Huizinga, J. (2009). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Beacon Press.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Lantieri, L. (2002). "A Vision of Schools with Spirit." In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 07–20). Beacon Press.
- Littleton, D., & Sole, M. (2025). *Seeking the Mystical Child*. Routledge.
- Louv, R. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder* (Updated and expanded.). Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Miller, L. J. (2015). *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. St. Martin's Press.
- Miller, L. J. (2021). *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life*. Random House.
- Osnes, B. (2018). Youth Shine in Musical Theatre for Sustainability. *Journal of Sustainability Education*.
- Roerden, L. P. (2002). Lessons of the Wild. In Linda Lantieri (Ed.), *Schools with spirit: Nurturing the inner lives of children and teachers* (pp. 53–76). Beacon Press.
- Schechner, R. (2004). *Performance Theory*. Routledge.
- Sole, M., & Littleton, D. (2023). *Wonder-Filled Knowing and Learning*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Turner, V. (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*.

Appendix

I Was Raised by This Place Activity—Exploring Place, Family, and Identity

Component	Details
Pre-Writing Interviews	To guide children into the poem, these questions can be helpful: 1. Where do you come from? 2. Where does your loved one come from? 3. Where do you live (city, house, apartment)? 4. What do you love about the place you live in? 5. Do you speak another language? 6. What is your favorite word in that language?
Group Structure	Children worked individually, guided by the teacher.
Activity Objective	To guide children in expressing their personal and cultural identities through poetic reflection, connecting place, family, sensory experiences, and emotions.
Activity Flow	1. Conduct short interviews based on prompts. 2. Guide children to use responses to craft their own “I was raised by...” poems following a structured format. 3. Encourage oral sharing of poems in a circle.
Poem Structure	<p>First Two Lines: “I was raised by...” (Name 3 things you see, 2 things you hear, and 1 thing you can touch in your place/house/country.)</p> <p>Second Two Lines: “I was raised by...” (Describe 2 smells or tastes that remind you of where you are from.)</p> <p>Third Two Lines: “I was raised by...” (Name your favorite season and 2 natural elements that shaped your world.)</p> <p>Final Line: “I was raised by...” (Describe a feeling you have about your place or a loved one.)</p>
Optional Extensions	Create an illustrated book of all the class poems; Share poems in a classroom performance or school-wide event; Explore artistic extension from the poem through music, movement, acting, and visual art.
Intended Outcomes	Strengthen children's narrative and poetic skills; Foster connection to place, family, and cultural heritage; Cultivate emotional literacy and pride in identity.