Macrothink Institute™

Global Journal of Educational Studies
ISSN 2377-3936
2024, Vol. 10, No. 1

Exploring the Outdoor Space as a Vehicle for Children's Spiritual Development and Transformation in Early Childhood Education

Ruth Wills

School of Education, Liverpool Hope University

Taggart Avenue, Liverpool, U.K.

Tel: 0151-291-3033 E-mail: willsr@hope.ac.uk

Received: December 19, 2023 Accepted: January 4, 2024 Published: January 20, 2024

doi:10.5296/gjes.v10i1.21658 URL: https://doi.org/10.5296/gjes.v10i1.21658

Abstract

Although the rhetoric of children's spirituality is absent in Early Childhood educational policy in England and Wales, considering its relationship with the outdoor space, it might be deemed an implicit yet essential aspect of learning with and caring for young children. This article posits that the outdoor space provides a locus for the nurture of spirituality, including fostering a sense of self and well-being, encouraging existential questioning, and embracing responsibility. Exploring three meta-dimensions of spirituality – relation through inclusive play, creativity, and reflection - and considering the notion of transformation in learning, it is proposed that the outdoor space might provide opportunities for children in all global contexts to receive care and in turn become citizens who care for natural world and others.

Keywords: Nature, Spirituality, Transformation, Sustainability, Care

1. Introduction

This theoretical article explores the relationship between spirituality and the outdoor space within the lived experience of young children, and in the light of this, considers how learning in nature might promote a sense of self and other, leading to responsibility and transformation.

Contextually, the discussion provides a rationale for the inclusion of spirituality within the rhetoric and practice of Early Childhood education in England and Wales, but furthermore, based on an understanding of spirituality as an innate and universal phenomenon (Newberg & D'Aquili, 2001; de Souza, 2016), the piece posits the significance of spirituality and nature for *all* children; therefore, it is also applicable to practitioners across the global community. As a conceptual piece, the argument is predicated on an understanding that developing a sense of self within an awareness of something greater than everyday experience (McCreery, 1996), through outdoor learning, educational settings might encourage young children to develop a positive sense of 'other' leading to a commitment to care and take responsibility within the natural world.

The argument presented within this article addresses an evident deficit whereby an awareness of the spiritual lives of children, and the importance of this for their well-being and development as well as the understanding of their relationship to others within the world, is largely absent not only from literature pertaining to Early Childhood Education globally, but also policy. During the past three decades, Children's Spirituality as a discipline has grown in interest and influence through thinkers such as Ron Best (1986), David Hay and Rebecca Nye (1998; 2006), as well as Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker (2000). Yet, whilst an early chapter by Elaine McCreery (2006) was located within the discourse of education for young children, other early literature focused more widely on the importance of the separation of spirituality from religion, promoting a more humanistic understanding of spirituality. A generic description of spirituality was provided, encompassing all ages and relevant to a variety of practical child-related disciplines such as health and social care as well as education.

More recently however, research concerning the spirituality of *young* children has emerged, providing a platform for discussion (Adams et al., 2016; Hyde, 2018; Mata-McMahon et al., 2019) and a starting point for the implementation of a spiritual dimension to the Early Childhood curriculum. This is encouraging, but more literature is required, not least that which locates spirituality within the real-world context of Early Childhood Education, with recommendations for practitioners. This paper serves to address this gap. Furthermore, although writing from the context of England and Wales, it is important to note a common misunderstanding concerning spirituality across wider educational settings such as Malta, Belgium, Greece and Ireland, as policy makers "continue to equate spiritual with religious education" (Polemikou & Da Silva, 2020, p. 319). As a result, the aversion of the rhetoric of spirituality within policy means that educators are missing an opportunity to recognise and promote what Schein (2014) describes as a sense of presence, joy and awareness, inspired by questioning and creativity, leading to an awareness of what is beyond the self.

Schein (2014) notes that spirituality, as indeed cognitive and physical development, are readily promoted in nature. The personal experiences of the current author, a teacher in an English primary school, concur with this notion. Therefore, given the priority placed upon outdoor learning in Early Years Education, for example within the *Early Years Foundation Stage* policy for England and Wales (DfE, 2021), it is also the conjecture of this article that inherent within young children's learning experiences in the outdoor space, is the opportunity for the development of their spirituality. This deems it necessary to raise an awareness of the

significance of this for school leaders and teachers. As much as contexts such as Australia and The Netherlands do recognise spirituality within Early Childhood Education and correlate children's engagement and play within nature as promoting relaxation and responsibility, research highlights that in practice, spiritual engagement through nature is insufficient to be impactful, often eschewed in favour of the more performative and measurable aspects of the curriculum (Robinson, 2019; Prins et al., 2022). This article therefore aims to provide a rationale for the promotion of spirituality through nature in the early years, enhanced by practical examples underpinned by a philosophical premise, in order to continue this ongoing discussion, and provide recommendations for further research.

As stated at the outset, as a theoretical article, the analysis of ideas undertaken here is not drawn from empirical research data, but rather reflects the relationship between theory and observation. As a method for exploration, 'conceptual analysis' is used as a framework since, as Gatley (2023, p. 550) points out, such a task facilitates an interplay between "conceptual work and real- world educational consequences" that is imperative for curriculum planning and school development. Thus, following an exegesis of literature and policy concerning both spirituality and nature, the discussion, which also includes a philosophical premise, continues to explore how three meta-spaces of spiritual development inspired by nature - friendship, creativity and reflection – enhanced by real-world observations (BERA, 2018), might encourage practitioners to consider spirituality as an essential dimension of learning within and beyond the classroom (Goodliff, 2016) and notes how a spiritual pedagogy can be transformational (Bone, 2016).

2. Spirituality

Spirituality is a nebulous concept (Adams et al., 2015). There is no one definition or meaning although its inclusion in the *Education Reform Act* (HMSO, 1988) means that spirituality is part of educational rhetoric in England and Wales. Internationally, a burgeoning catalogue of literature that explores Children's Spirituality places it within educational discourse for children and young people. Whilst historically being synonymous with religion it more recently has been acknowledged as a human phenomenon, intrinsic to all human life and experience (Erricker & Erricker, 2000). Indeed, according to scholars David Hay and Rebecca Nye, who posit spirituality as separate from religion, the concept equates to a relational consciousness. This is an "unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness" (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 109) or even a heightened awareness of experience and is the starting point for personal meaning making within everyday life.

With the term 'God' as a provisional label, relational consciousness does also acknowledge a transcendent dimension within lived experience (Hyde, 2008). This does not pertain to a religious experience per se - rather an awareness of transcendence in the natural world. This is an important factor to consider when reflecting on the outdoor space as a vehicle for nurturing children's spirituality. As Hay and Nye (2006) suggest, an awareness of wonder for example, in seeing a waterfall or sunset, is characteristic of an aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. This might inspire a sense of mystery and contemplation but can be within or removed from a religious framework.

For other scholars, spirituality involves notions such as connectedness and relationship, sometimes leading to a sense of unity of self and other (de Souza, 2010); it can inspire a corporeal dimension of knowing (physical and emotional) within everyday life (Hyde, 2008) and it relates to a sense of self as part of something greater (Adams et al., 2008). Spirituality inspires imagination (Mountain, 2011), provides a space for personal reflection, and leads to the consideration of existential questions (Webster, 2004). Spirituality is related to play

which inspires creativity and critical thinking, and through this, children might negotiate ideas about identity, culture, and society (Goodliff, 2013). It also concerns children's well-being, including fostering an emerging sense of self and happiness (Erricker, 2009). Finally, spirituality might again be exercised through play, additionally providing opportunities for children to experience moments of wonder, awe, joy, and inner-peace (Mata-McMahon et al., 2019; Mata-McMahon & Escarfuller, 2023).

Since 1992, the *National Curriculum* in England and Wales has stated that schools are required to provide for the Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural (SMSC) development of children; thus a recognition of the value of spirituality has been and continues to be evident in education in this geographical context (DfE, 2014). This is mirrored in the inspection framework for England and Wales, within which the requirements for each aspect of SMSC are detailed. According to the *School Inspection Handbook* (Ofsted, 2022), spirituality includes some attention to religion or belief; however, this does not find itself within the domain of Religious Education, but rather from a human perspective, encourages children to value their own beliefs and to respect the beliefs or non-belief of others. This sits comfortably with the assertion of David Hay (2017), that spirituality is the underpinning of religion for some, but for others might be more relevant to ethics, altruism, or social action.

Also under the heading 'Spiritual Development' the inspection framework (Ofsted, 2022) promotes fascination and enjoyment in learning and engaging with the world, as well as imagination, creativity, and reflection. These aspects reflect those already listed above and it might be therefore suggested that spiritual pedagogy concerns the children's personal lives and experiences as the starting point upon which they are able to reflect on their connectedness with others and the world in order to make meaning. These aspects of relationship, imagination, creativity, and reflection are significant when considering the meta-spaces of spirituality (Goodliff, 2016) in relation to outdoor learning, explored in due course.

It is important to note that the *National Curriculum* in England and Wales (DfE, 2014) is statutory for children in Key Stages One and above, that is, for children over the age of five. However, in the context of Early Childhood education, the rhetoric of spirituality is not explicit. In the *Early Years Foundation Stage* statutory framework document (DfE, 2021), which is the legal framework for all education and care settings for children up to age 5, the word 'spirituality' is absent. This is surprising given the holistic nature of early years education, not least due to the influence of early pioneers such as Montessori and Steiner who considered spirituality as innate and the force behind authentic learning (Boyd, 2018). Similarly the popularity of the inclusive Reggio Emilia approach to Early Childhood education, with its 'hundred languages' embodying a whole child pedagogy (Gandini, 2011) also promotes a spiritual dimension to learning. The situation in England and Wales sits in contrast to the curricula of Australia and New Zealand for example, within which the importance placed on connectedness and belonging reveals a space for spirituality in the classroom (Adams et al., 2016).

Whilst not explicitly featured in Early Childhood policy, it might be argued that in the light of the elements of spirituality listed above, the concept is still present within the four principles for practice set out in the *Early Years Foundation Stage* statutory framework (DfE, 2021). For example, *The Unique Child* concerns a child's holistic development including good health, creativity, and criticality, and in *Enabling Environments*, outdoor and open-ended learning is prioritized. Similarly, within *Understanding the world* a child's relationship with others and the natural world is encouraged and *Learning and Development* includes playing, exploring, active learning, thinking critically and thinking creatively. Indeed, the *School Inspection Framework* (DfE, 2022, p. 334) includes an assessment of 'children's

personal, social and emotional development, including whether they feel safe and are secure, stimulated and happy.'

Yet, despite this encouraging picture from within Early Childhood policy, there is a danger that the explicit language of spirituality, conspicuous by its absence, might yet become problematised or misunderstood amongst practitioners that still associate the concept with religion. As Adams et al. (2016) suggest, as much as educational policy in England and Wales aims to be inclusive, advising that spirituality and religion are not synonymous, due to a lack of an agreed definition, there is yet less understanding of what spirituality means in the educational context. Moreover, it is often misappropriated. Therefore, the current discussion aims to encourage Early Childhood educators, both in the local context, and across international contexts, to refrain from being cautious around the language of spirituality and to consider this as a valid aspect of pedagogy for young children. Since, as noted in Reggio Emilia practice (Gandini, 2011) the outdoor space is a significant learning partner, this discussion piece will explore how the outdoor space has the potential to be the locus of spiritual development in all young children, so to advocate for its inclusion in policy and practice going forward.

3. The Outdoor Space

According to Greenman (2005), nature is universal and timeless. It is unpredictable, bountiful and alive with sounds; it nourishes and heals. Nature relates to a variety of spaces; therefore, it might be represented by the open field, the seascape, the park, or even potted plants in a small area of a backyard or on a window ledge. Engaging with nature can mean exposure to a vast landscape or exploring the activity in a bug house. It can mean experiencing various kinds of weather, terrains and views, noticing tiny drops of rain on a leaf, or following the flight of a bee around a rose plant. In whatever way nature is experienced, it can encourage young children to see the world as "fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement" (Carson, 1956, p. 42).

Certainly since the turn of the current century, concern has been raised over the reduction of children's opportunities to access nature, not least due to worries about safety and the rise in access to technology. Louv (2005) for example, who promotes the notion of nature-deficit disorder, cites current trends in education, with target setting prioritizing academic success, as well as the evolving structure of towns and cities, as cultural and institutional barriers to experiencing nature. Personal and familial barriers such as commercialised and computerised play also contribute to this decline. In addition to this, accessibility to natural spaces is minimised in certain socio-economic communities, and often safety concerns outweigh the need for risk and challenge in play. Therefore, it is argued here that not only should learning in nature be prioritised in Early Childhood pedagogy, but also encouraged in settings across all sectors and all international educational contexts.

It is important to note that within Early Childhood policy in England and Wales, the outdoor space *is* considered as significant in young children's learning and development. This requirement is a feature of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* statutory framework (DfE, 2021). Furthermore, within *Birth to 5 Matters*, the non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Early Education, 2021), the word 'outdoors' is featured 107 times; this document focuses on the importance of the outdoor space in promoting well-being and inclusion, physical development, relationship building, a chance to relax, and to reflect and make sense of the world. Additionally, akin to notion of 'biophilia' (Wilson, 1984), *Birth to 5 Matters* emphasises how engagement with nature can promote a sense of responsibility, leading to children becoming "confident caretakers and problem-solvers of the future" (Early

Education, 2021, p. 35). This then brings a transformative element to learning, one of the hallmarks of spiritual pedagogy considered from the perspective of New Zealand Early Childhood literature (Bone, 2016).

4. Transformation

Using Rousseau's preferential option for nature as a learning environment, and Louv's campaign against 'nature-deficit disorder' as a backdrop, Bone (2016) primarily reflects on her own experience of being in nature. Noting that "the trees and birds are beautiful" and that "walking in the garden is its own meditation," she ponders "if only I could achieve this purity of living all the time" (Bone, 2016, p. 253). Here spirituality involves a way of life which embraces an intimate connection with nature. In moving beyond the material/spiritual divide, this intimate connection sees the individual and nature as one, much similar to Buber's 'I-thou' relation (1970) which has no borders. In the light of this, Bone's assertion (2016) is that through heightened awareness and mindfulness, individuals can become more responsible for nature, leading to transformed behaviours for a sustainable way of life. She suggests that the practical nature of spirituality supports a perception of people and places as unique, leading to children upholding principles for sustainable living, inclusivity and valuing all human life. This of course reflects the Education for Sustainable Development agenda which has gained attention over recent years (Kemp, 2018) and promotes a sense of children as agents – not only of learning, but of social change (Hyde, 2010).

To support her assertion, Bone (2016, p. 247) cites creation theologian Thomas Berry who suggests that his early childhood experiences provided him with an emotional attachment and intimacy with nature (for example, sitting in a meadow and feeling an attunement with the universe); he has described these experiences as 'magic moments.' In turn these experiences of the outdoor space inspired a profound level of devotion to nature in his everyday life, leading to a passion for environmental advocacy and activism as an adult. Bone suggests that similarly, young children's experience of nature might inspire a willingness to take responsibility for the natural environment. She contests that "early memories of forging a relationship with nature influence some people so that the environment may then become what they care about throughout life" (Bone, 2016, p. 248). As such, engagement with nature can affect a child on a personal level but can furthermore have a transformative impact on the sustainability of the natural environment. This is reinforced by Harris who, also writing about spirituality and nature in the early years, asserts that as children experience nature, this will inform them that the natural world is not separate but a part of who they are; in turn they will have "the possibility to grow and honour" their connection to "the earth and also humanity" (Harris, 2016, p. 93).

The intimate connection of children with nature can also have a personal impact on children in their own Being (Heidegger, 1962). The notion of a 'magic moment' is further reflected in the work of Christopher Walton (2015). Working in a woodland activity and retreat centre in England, Walton engages young children in spiritual tasks undertaken within the centre's extensive grounds. One task includes children sitting in silence and solitude in nature. He writes that the participants "sit, look, listen, smell, feel, think, watch and, if they want to, write or draw in their diaries at the time or later" (Walton, 2015, p. 5). He names this activity 'magic spots.' Walton prioritises this activity in its potential to sharpen non-verbal skills such as watching and waiting, and reflecting on interconnectedness with self, others, and the world; the results of these experiences have included children's increased self-awareness, an enhanced appreciation of the natural world (such as the blueness of the sky or the sound of birds) and a regulation of thoughts. One child said in response to her magic spot: "when I was there, sitting in all that silence with all the space, all my thoughts came flowing out of my

brain, like I couldn't stop them" (Walton, 2015, p. 6).

Additionally, the website of the activity centre advocates for a 'nature connection' (www.ringsfield-hall.co.uk). This connection is inspired by children being present in nature – present to themselves and their environment – and involves letting go of distractions to focus on the sights, sounds, smells, and textures around them. This is a mindful activity that draws on basic sensory and awareness skills and is promoted for the benefit it can have for well-being and positive mental health. As much as this is valid for Early Childhood pedagogy, recent research highlights how frequent exposure to the outdoor space might have a positive impact on more formal learning sessions as well. Without nature being a means to an end, it is important to note the value placed on outdoor learning by practitioners. Prendergast (2022, p.14) reflects on data gained through an online survey:

> Responses outlined that children have improved focus and attention indoors after spending time outdoors. Participants mentioned that the time children spend outdoors allows them to become more engaged with their learning. When they were asked whether they noticed any changes in a child's behaviour or mood after spending time outdoors, one participant answered, 'One of the biggest differences is their ability to concentrate on indoor activities once they have had some outdoor time.' Another responder made the observation that when outside 'children who may have difficulty focusing inside the classroom are more engaged.' This ultimately shows that spending time outdoors, releasing energy, improves the child's ability to focus more and engage more with activities inside.

In contrast to the intimate connection with nature, Bone also notes that a common definition of spirituality is awe and wonder and she links this to experiences where the "grandeur of nature is obvious" (Bone, 2016, p. 248). From a more micro perspective, Harris (2016) notes that as children observe new discoveries such as a bird, butterfly, or spider's web, nature can create a spark of awe, wonder and playful spontaneity by giving pleasure and joy to all. Hay and Nye (2006, p. 72) equally use simple examples such as watching "a match being struck" or "water coming out of a tap" to highlight a sense of wonder. Further, it is their assertion that through such experiences children can have a sense of being in the presence of something 'Other' and it is these moments that can lead to a consideration of the 'big questions' about life and meaning, leading to deep reflection on existential issues such as identity, place, and purpose. Wondering therefore moves beyond an intellectual experience, to a consideration of ultimate mystery. Furthermore, it concerns an awareness of and connectedness with the dimension of life that interrupts the immediate or regular to inspire new and authentic meaning-making.

The idea of such an interruption is reminiscent of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's notion regarding 'infinity' (2003, cited in Wills, 2020), in which infinity relates to the dimension of existence that is 'beyond' knowing or reduction and allows self and Other to relate existentially. Through the interruption of 'infinity' inspired by an experience of awe and wonder, the educational paradigm in which standardisation or actualisation in learning (as illustrated by a National Curriculum, standardised tests, or Early Learning Goals) might be re-evaluated in relation to Other; therefore, the space to experience, question and explore should be as meaningful to learners as end-results. This again illuminates the importance of the outdoor space for children's spiritual development within and beyond what can be measured.

5. Meta-Spaces of Spiritual Learning – Observations and Implications

Gill Goodliff has for a long time contributed to Early Childhood research, often in relation to

the spirituality of young children. Her concept of the spiritual meta-environments in which education takes place (2016), considers non- physical learning spaces as instrumental in meaningful learning and development. Her assertion is that spirituality is mediated within three meta-environments: the friendship space, imaginative narrative, and the solitary imaginative, and the language of spirituality relating to these spaces is noted as relationships, creativity, and reflection. She draws on Moss and Petrie to underline the significance of the learning space and quotes: "spaces of everyday democracy are also discursive accommodating different types of expression, dialogue and reflection… where children's voices can be listened to and heard" (2002, cited in Goodliff, 2016, p. 74).

Reflecting on Goodliff's theory, the discussion now turns to consider each of the meta-spaces highlighted above, in order to posit how the outdoor space might facilitate both personal and inter-personal development, leading to transformation and responsibility. This exploration is supported by examples taken from observations of the spiritual experiences of young children in the outdoors, highlighting the impact each one has on the young children.

From an ethical perspective, it is important to highlight the methodology and ethical underpinning to the examples, which serve to enhance the theoretical discussion, rather than offer new data drawn from empirical research. Due to lockdown restrictions in 2021 in the U.K., it was not possible to undertake formal observations as planned. As an alternative, informal observations to support the theory were made during this time in family visits to local natural spaces. A non-participant observation approach was adopted (Rozsahegyi, 2019). According to BERA (2018, p. 15), "It is accepted that, sometimes, gaining consent from all concerned in public spaces will not be feasible; however, attempts to make contact should be documented." As most of the observations were made from a distance, consent was not gained except for in the first and third scenarios where consent and assent was gained from all actors.

Goodliff's first meta-space is friendship (relationships). As suggested above, for many authors in the field of Children's Spirituality (Hyde, 2008; Hay & Nye, 2016), spirituality includes the relation of self to the world, others, and the self. de Souza et al. (2004) especially consider connectedness as a continuum between the self and ultimate unity with 'other' – it is this dimension that gives meaning and purpose as already identified. Goodliff (2016) however highlights connectedness simply as kindness and compassion. It involves recognising and accepting the other.

In a scenario based on observation, kindness was evidenced as children on a natural play park were seen helping each other to balance on wobbly logs and cheering each other on through different obstacles. Involved in this play were older mixed-race children, younger white British children and my own child, a teenager with a disability. In this situation there was no division, no sense of separation from other and an overriding sense of connection between all the players. Later, in a second scenario the same group took part in making a bug house (encouraging responsibility for nature) and den-making, again all working together with a sense of unity and purpose. To reinforce the value of this meta-space, Harris (2016, p. 100) notes: "when we bring playfulness to our relationships, desires and dreams, we open ourselves deeply to family and community connections making them more meaningful and soul-nourishing."

The next space, imaginative narrative, involves creativity. For Goodliff (2016, p. 74) creativity includes exploring possibility, fantasy, and embodied expression. This includes imaginative play, through which aspects of rights, culture and identity might be explored, also contributing to meaning-making, dialogue, and reflection. She posits the open-ended

nature of play against the 'market-driven creativity' of contemporary schooling and argues for a more democratic approach to learning through which the 'humanising' principles of early childhood might be introduced again – empathy, collaboration, and wisdom (Goodliff, 2016, p. 76).

Through the observation of a third scenario, examples of wild art evidenced children using their imaginations and learning to negotiate in a democratic way – who will collect the materials, who will plan the picture, who will take the photograph? They used skills of evaluation and debate, and all worked together for a successful collective outcome. However, there was also evidence of them being 'in the moment' – fully absorbed in an activity, reminiscent of the notion of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). On another occasion, children were witnessed acting out a fantasy story in the bushes at one location, using sticks and leaves for props and costumes, with other young children engaging in role play on the grassy bank of another. In this location a family were re-telling the story of the trolls in the Billy Goats Gruff on the bridge. Harris (2016) again reinforces the importance of this space, suggesting that young children have an incredible capacity for imagination and creativity, through which they can create solutions, solve problems, and face new challenges.

Finally, Goodliff's solitary imaginative space (2016) is a space for reflection – becoming aware of the self in a new way. It can encourage children to become aware of their Being, their place in the world, and their response to the world. For example, my own family one day explored a rotunda on the top of a hill and we imagined living there 200 years ago. We also visited Stonehenge which encouraged a feeling of self in relation not just to the world but to history. Reflection is a significant aspect of spiritual development, and possibly its distinctive characteristic. For children's experiences in nature to be meaningful, considering 'what does this mean for me?' allows children to question, wrestle with and try to make sense of experiences in order to make a difference. Such reflection inspires existential questioning. This is the transformative dimension of spirituality that can move children (and adults) into new ways of thinking, behaving, and living.

On a final visit, we saw a notice board with the words 'Listen to the sounds of nature, breathe in the fresh air and enjoy the views of the garden and park.' This reminded us of the importance of silence and space, and it validates those moments of remembering and stillness. As Harris (2016, p. 98) notes "taking time to sit quietly in silence can be very soothing and calming for a young child. By doing this, a child can be responsive to the natural rhythm and energy of the universe." As stated earlier, this is essential for positive mental health, supporting an holistic and spiritual approach to Early Childhood education (Lunn, 2015).

6. Spirituality as Care

Reflecting on key ideas highlighted in this discussion, one might consider here that the outdoor space, with its capacity to nurture children's spirituality, not least including the three meta-spaces of spiritual development, is the locus of care. It is important to note that spirituality and the outdoor space should not be confined to the classroom, but are equally valuable for alternative or home education, work with children in the care system or residential settings, and even hospital education. For one local authority in England, engagement with nature is proposed as a means of care, with their website (sheffnews.com/news/fostering-outdoor-city) positing that in reducing stress, increasing resilience, and even promoting better sleep for young children, the outdoor space is an essential tool for carers and social workers. Imagination is also a key factor here, with the website stating: "Sticks and stones and puddles are free open-ended toys which children will

play with again and again because they involve imagination, unlike a pink plastic cartoon creature with buttons and a battery." Additionally, one Health Care Trust in England has produced 'spiritual care activities' for children in hospital (bwc.nhs.uk/spiritual-care-activities-and-resources/). The activities allow the children to reflect on their current situation and provide comfort in sharing memories or thinking about what they are grateful for. Nature also features in some of these activities, either in the actual outdoors, or in children's minds, allowing them to focus on a dimension greater than everyday events, as stated earlier (McCreery, 1996).

Care also might be equated with children's care for each other and the world. As suggested earlier, often engagement with nature leads to transformation, and it is always interesting to hear how children's responses might lead to changed behaviour or a pledge to do something positive or practical in the world. Being with others in nature can also promote a sense of inclusion and unity in diversity, illuminating a micro-glimpse of what might become a more global reality. When learning is meaningful, and inspires a response, it becomes manifest as care. The important issue here is that care is inspired from within – not forced by external influences, pressures or even projects. It is care that comes directly from the presence of the learner in nature, an awareness of something greater than the self, and the opportunity to engage with the outdoor space in a way that is meaningful.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, reflecting on the premise drawn from theory, it is possible to suggest that the proposition offered here in terms of the transformational nature of spirituality and the outdoor space provides a rationale for the inclusion of the rhetoric of spirituality within Early Childhood policy and practice. As much as the context of the current author is England and Wales, this might be applicable also to policy makers and practitioners in other contexts, especially in the light of the increasingly performative paradigm of teaching, learning and assessment in schools (Wills, 2020). As Early Childhood theory is often based upon a holistic approach to pedagogy, with the child at the centre of learning experiences (Eaude, 2008), it is the personal and existential dimension of spirituality, as well as the inter-personal activities that promote connectedness and relationship building, which suggest that spirituality as a concept is implicit, yet not made explicit within policy and practice. It is suggested here that leaders and practitioners in Early Childhood settings might not evade this concept but begin to adopt an understanding of how the classroom space, as well as the curriculum, might promote the spiritual values explored in this paper, and through further research and Continuous Professional Development, highlight the impact of spiritual development through outdoor learning for the future.

References

Adams, K., Bull, L., & Maynes, M. L. (2016). Towards an understanding of the distinctive features of young children's spirituality. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *24*(5), 760-774. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.996425

Adams, K., Hyde, B., & Woolley, R. (2008). *The Spiritual Dimension of Childhood*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Adams, K., Monahan, J., & Wills, R. (2015). Losing the whole child? A national survey of primary education training provision for spiritual, moral social and cultural education. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(2), 199-216. https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2015.1030388

Best, R. (1996). *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child.* London: Cassell.

Bone, J. (2016). Environmental issues and spirituality: tracing the past and making contemporary connections. In M. de Souza, J. Bone, & J. Watson (Eds.), *Spirituality across Disciplines: Research and Practice* (pp. 245-258). Netherlands: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31380-1

Boyd, D. (2018). Early childhood education for sustainability and the legacies of two pioneering giants. *Early Years, 38*(2), 227-239. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2018.1442422

British Education Research Association. (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition*. Retrieved from https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Carson, R. (1962). *The Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.

de Souza, M. (2010). Meaning and connectedness: Australian perspectives on education and spirituality – an introduction. In M. de Souza, & J. Rimes (Eds.), *Meaning and connectedness: Australian perspectives on education and spirituality* (pp. 1-6). Australia: Australian College of Educators.

de Souza, M. (2016). *Spirituality in Education in a Global, Pluralised world*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315752761

de Souza, M., Cartwright, P., & McGilp, E. J. (2004). The perceptions of young people who live in a regional city in Australia of their spiritual wellbeing: Implications for education. *Journal of Youth Studies, 7*(2), 155-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/1367626042000238695

Department for Education. (2014). *The National Curriculum in England. Framework for Key Stages 1-4.* Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4

Department for Education. (2015). *Promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children: statutory guidance for local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England.* Retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413368/Promoting_the_health_and_well-being_of_looked-after_children.pdf

Department for Education. (2021). *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2

Early Education. (2021). *Birth to 5 Matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Retrieved from https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2021/04/Birthto5Matters-download.pdf

Eaude, T. (2008). *Children's Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development: Primary and Early Years*. London: Sage.

Erricker, C., & Erricker, J. (2000). *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education.* London: Routledge Falmer.

Erricker, J. (2009). The Importance of Happiness to Children's Education and Wellbeing. In de M. Souza, L.J. Francis, J. O'Higgins-Norman, & D. Scott (Eds.), *International Handbook*

of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing (pp. 739-752). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9018-9

Gandini L. (2011). History, ideas, and basic principles: An interview with Loris Malaguzzi. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The Hundred Languages of Children, the Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation* (3rd ed., pp. 27-72). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Gatley, J. (2023) Why concepts matter, what conceptual analysis is for, and the case of knowledge in education. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 71*(5), 549-565. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2234453

Goodliff, G. (2013). Spirituality expressed in creative learning: young children's imagining play as space for mediating their spirituality. *Early Child Development and Care, 183*(3), 1054-1071. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.792253

Goodliff, G. (2016). Spirituality in Early Childhood Education and Care. In M. de Souza, J. Bone, & J. Watson (Eds.), *Spirituality across Disciplines: Research and Practice* (pp. 67-80). Netherlands: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31380-1

Greenman, J. (2005). *Caring spaces, learning spaces* (2nd ed.). Redmond, WA: Exchange Press Inc.

Harris, K. (2016). Let's play at the park! Family pathways promoting spiritual resources to inspire nature, pretend play, storytelling, intergenerational play, and celebration. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 21*(2), 90-103. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1164669

Hay, D. (2017). *Why Spirituality is difficult for Westerners*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Hay, D., & Nye, R. (2006). *The Spirit of the Child.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

HMSO. (1988). *Education Reform Act*. London: HMSO.

Hyde, B. (2008). *Children and spirituality: Searching for meaning and Connectedness.* London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315105611-17

Hyde, B. (2010). Agency, Play and Spiritual Development in the Early Years' Curriculum. In M. de Souza, & J. Rimes (Eds.), *Meaning and connectedness: Australian perspectives on education and spirituality* (pp. 92-104). Australia: Australian College of Educators.

Hyde, B. (2017). Nurturing the spiritual child: recognising, addressing and nurturing spirituality in early years' classrooms through a dispositional framework. In M. de Souza & A. Halafoff (Eds.), *Re-enchanting Education and Spiritual well-being: Fostering Belonging and Meaning-Making for Global Citizens* (pp. 201-213). Abingdon: Routledge.

Kemp, N. (2018). Early Childhood Education for Sustainability. In S. Powell, & K. Smith (Eds.), *An Introduction to Early Childhood Studies* (4th ed., pp. 247-260). London: Sage.

Louv, R. (2005). *The last child in the woods: Saving our children form nature deficit disorder*. Chapel Hill, NY: Algonquin books.

Lunn, A. (2015). A Critical Analysis of the Role of Spirituality within the Early Years Curriculum. *Transformations, 1*(1), 27-41.

Mata-McMahon, J., & Escarfuller, P. (2023). *Children's Spirituality in Early Childhood*

Education. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003081463

Mata-McMahon, J., Haslip, M., & Schein, D. (2019). Early Childhood educators' perceptions of nurturing spirituality in secular settings. *Early Child Development and Care, 189*(14), 2233-2251. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1445734

McCreery, E. (1996). Talking to Young People about Things Spiritual. In R. Best (Ed.), *Education, Spirituality and the Whole Child* (pp. 196 -205). London: Cassell.

Mountain, V. (2007). Educational contexts for the development of children's spirituality: Exploring the use of imagination. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 12*(2), 191-205. https://doi.org/10.1080/13644360701467535

Newberg, A., & D'Aquili, E. (2001). *Why God won't go away*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group.

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. (2022). *School Inspection Handbook*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook

Polemikou, A., & Da Silva, J.P. (2020). Readressing Spiritual Growth: *What can we learn from Childhood Education? Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 62*(3), 334-351. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820938612

Prendergast, K. (2022). *An exploration of children's well-being in relation to outdoor learning in the early years*. B.A. diss. Liverpool Hope University.

Prins, J., van der Wilt, F., van der Veen, C., & Hovinga, D. (2022). Nature play in early childhood education: A systematic review and meta ethnography of qualitative research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.995164

Robinson, C. (2019). Young children's spirituality: A focus on engaging with nature. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 44*(4), 339-350. https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119870907

Rozsahegyi, T. (2019). Observations. In M. Lambert (Ed.), *Practical Research Methods in Education: An Early Researcher's Critical Guide* (pp. 23-34). London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351188395-3

Schein, D. (2014). Nature's Role in Children's Spiritual Development. *Children, Youth and Environments, 24*(2), 78-101. https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0078

Sena, M. A. B., Damiano, R. F., Lucchetti, G., & Peres, M. F. P. (2021). Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 756080. https:doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.756080

Walton, C. (2015). Childhood awaits every person. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 20*(1), 4-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2014.999228

Webster, S. R. (2004). An existential framework of spirituality. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 9*(1), 7-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436042000200799

Wills, R. (2018). Music and Spirit: creative spiritual pedagogy. In M. de Souza, & A. Halafoff (Eds.), *Re-enchanting Education and Spiritual well-being: Fostering Belonging and Meaning-Making for Global Citizens* (pp. 97-109). Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315105611-9

Wills, R. (2020). *Learning beyond the objective in Primary education: Philosophical*

Perspectives from Theory and Practice. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201233

Wilson, E. O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674045231

Copyright Disclaimer