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# Development of spiritual literacy of children by educators in forest preschool education

Jitka Patakiová, Jitka Musilová and Ivo Jirásek 

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## ABSTRACT

The study presents the results of qualitative research into the concept of spiritual literacy as understood by forest preschool educators and its integration into educational processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The main thematic motifs highlight the personal journey towards spirituality, the perception of spirituality, the specifics of children's spirituality, a love for nature, and the development of spiritual literacy in preschool education. The findings indicate that some educators regard spiritual literacy as an important element of children's personal development, while others focus more on practical activities related to nature and creative learning. The integration of spiritual literacy into the educational process is understood as a means to support the overall development of the child and to enhance their personal and social skills.

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## KEYWORDS

Nature; children development; transcendence; non-religious spirituality

## Introduction

For children under the age of six, spirituality is not a category separate from other expressions of life. It is a natural, spontaneous part of their everyday experience, a principled openness and trust to life and the world. Children know that life is worth living, that it is meaningful. They are naturally concerned with their feelings and are inclined to share philosophical themes, even if they cannot yet use the necessary conceptual apparatus (Gondáš 2020). Spirituality cannot be reduced to feelings and cognitive orientation alone, but spirituality is their integrating centre, as well as the centre of motives and attitudes, the core of personal identity and meaning of life (Řičan 2010). Spirituality is a principal characteristic of human beings, its centre is the person and its manifestation is constant self-realisation (Scheler 1981). It can be conceptualised as a universal human force or trait (Polemikou and Da Silva 2022), whose key characteristic is transcendence as something that goes beyond our inner self (Šovářiová Soósová 2022). The aim of our research is to gain a deeper understanding, through a qualitative design based on interpretative phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews, of how teachers in forest kindergartens perceive spirituality, what opportunities they see for its

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development in children, and how they integrate this development into the educational process.

## Literature review

### *Religious and non-religious spirituality*

The traditional form of expression of spirituality is religion, which provides frameworks and traditions for understanding spiritual experience and the search for meaning in life within the context of an organised community, an institution. However, the need for transcendence, deep experience and meaningfulness can be fulfilled beyond religious horizons (Němečková 2016). Non-religious spirituality is understood as a personal quest or a way to understand the fundamental questions of life or the meaning of life. Non-religious spirituality is associated with something informal, new, spontaneous, creative, a spiritual quest, freedom of individual expression, authentic inner experience or adventurous experimentation (Říčan, 2010).

However, the literature does not always sufficiently distinguish spirituality from religiosity. In order to support academic research on the phenomenon and to transfer knowledge into practice, it is desirable to consistently separate religious and non-religious spirituality (Chin-Kin Lee 2020; Polemikou and Da Silva 2022). Our research focuses on non-religious spirituality in the setting of a secular society, even with the knowledge that it is not always possible to strictly separate these two existential dimensions in individual experience.

### *Spirituality in Czech early childhood education*

In the Czech Republic, insufficient attention is paid to the spiritual dimension of preschool education. The key documents — *Strategie vzdělávací politiky České republiky do roku 2030 + (Strategy for Education Policy of the Czech Republic until 2030+, MŠMT 2020)*, and the *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro předškolní vzdělávání (Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education, NPI ČR 2024)* – contain no references to spirituality or spiritual development. Implicit connections can be found in the concepts used, such as ‘values’, ‘ethics’, and ‘well-being’; however, spirituality is not explicitly addressed within current educational policy. The mentioned documents define the goals, principles, and educational areas of Czech preschool education. Although they do not explicitly refer to spirituality, they support the development of the child’s whole personality – including dimensions that implicitly relate to spirituality.

The core principles include an holistic approach, that is, understanding the child as a whole being; a respectful and partnership-based approach; learning through experience and play; and an emphasis on values and prosocial learning. Educational areas relevant to spirituality in preschool education include ‘The Child and His/Her Mind’ – encompassing self-awareness, self-regulation, creativity, and reflection on experience; ‘The Child and the Other’ – the development of empathy, consideration, and relationships; ‘The Child and Society’ – the ethical and value-based foundations of behaviour; and ‘The Child and the World’ – openness to nature, the environment, and life as a whole. These areas provide

space for the indirect development of spiritual literacy, through activities focused on reflection, wonder, values, and relationships with nature and with oneself.

Our research, focused on how teachers in forest kindergartens understand spirituality and integrate it into education, can therefore be beneficial on three levels. In a theoretical sense, it can help anchor the concept of spiritual literacy within the educational discourse, where a clear definition and systematic approach are still lacking. It offers a secular, pedagogically accessible definition of spiritual development, compatible with the *Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education*. From a didactic perspective, it can help identify specific pedagogical situations, methods, and environments that support the development of children's spiritual literacy in the preschool years. From a societal perspective, it can broaden the conception of preschool education to include a spiritual dimension, which should be perceived as a natural part of personal development rather than a religious concept.

### ***Possibilities of spiritual development in early childhood education***

If educators do not have a personal relationship with spirituality, it cannot be assumed that they would consciously pay attention to the spiritual dimension in the development of children. In alternative forms of preschool education, such as forest kindergartens, Montessori, or Waldorf schools, spirituality is often approached more explicitly through experiential learning, connection with nature, and fostering a sense of awe and belonging (Boland 2025; Průcha 2012, 2013; Stoltenberg in Vošahlíková 2012, 2010), which naturally support the cultivation of the spiritual dimension of life. However, the spirituality of educators can significantly influence the educational process in an effective way, with higher levels of spirituality and empathy exhibited by teachers in alternative schools than those in traditional schools (Suchánková and Matušů 2020).

Forest kindergartens, which form the focus of our research, represent a particularly fertile environment for exploring children's spiritual development. Their close connection with nature, emphasis on experiential and sensory learning, and the cultivation of mindfulness, gratitude, and wonder provide rich opportunities for fostering spiritual literacy in an organic, non-dogmatic way (Stoltenberg in Vošahlíková 2010, 2012). Through everyday experiences in natural settings, children learn to perceive themselves as part of a larger whole – a perspective that lies at the heart of spiritual development.

At the same time, this does not mean that it is meaningful to include spirituality as a specific subject in the curriculum (Jirásek 2023a). In the context of a holistic conception of education, spiritual cultivation is a natural part of education, manifesting itself in the phenomena of awe (Løvoll and Sæther 2022), wonder (Schinkel 2020), mindfulness and contemplation (Benda 2019), prosocial behaviour (Piff et al. 2015), or environmental sensitivity (Heintzman 2010; Solomon 2003).

### ***Spiritual literacy***

Spirituality is by no means a static phenomenon or a goal that can be unambiguously achieved. To emphasise the developmental character of this dimension of personality, the term 'spiritual literacy' has recently been used, referring to the ability to reflect on and interpret experience, including openness to transcendence (Binder

2011, Jirásek, 2023b; Polemikou and Da Silva 2022). Despite partial differences in the understanding of this concept, it is evident that spiritual literacy is not merely knowledge or a skill, but rather a competence for cultivating the spiritual dimension of life.

Spiritual literacy emerges as a natural term to accurately capture this need. Spiritual literacy goes far beyond learning to read and write and beyond acquiring vocational skills. It goes beyond emotional and ethical literacy, leading to a much deeper dimension of insight and wisdom that arises from the heart as well as the head. Spiritual literacy does not develop on its own; it must be nurtured to grow and flourish, and for this to happen, spiritual education is needed at all levels. It must reach beyond the formal world of education and become part of lifelong learning (King 2010). Spiritual literacy cultivates four basic relationships, namely to self, to others, to nature, and to transcendence (Harris 2014; Jirásek 2023a, 2023b; Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2019, 2020).

Spirituality in relation to oneself is manifested by self-reflection (Robinson 2022), mindfulness (Mata-McMahon 2019), focus on the present state of being and the search for the meaning of life. Spirituality in relation to others is not based on personal individual qualities, but is about building space between people (Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020) and cannot be seen in a possessive way. Spirituality in relation to nature is manifested by affection and sensitivity to nature (Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020; Robinson 2019), the world, and is manifested by the possibility of 'connecting' to the landscape and the natural world. Spirituality in relation to transcendence is manifested by the capacity for wonder (Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020; Robinson 2022) and amazement. Experience, a deep connection that approaches extraordinary states of consciousness and transformative experience without entering the realm of the sacred and holy (Jirásek 2023b).

Early childhood education has the potential to pioneer the development of spiritual literacy in education (Bone 2008; Pandya 2024; Polemikou and Da Silva 2022). Existing studies have successively captured educators' conceptualisations of children's spiritual literacy and their unintentional and intentional practices in promoting children's spiritual literacy (Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2019, 2020). However, as Jirásek (2023a, 2023b) argues, spirituality cannot be seen as an educational domain or subject; rather, it is about supporting personal development, the teacher's approach and the philosophical basis of pedagogical work. From the perspective of teachers who promote spiritual education, it could be said that they are seeking answers to the questions 'Where do I come from and where am I going?', 'What is the meaning of my life?' and 'How can I become a person with desirable qualities and competencies?' (Chin-Kin Lee 2020).

## Methods

### *Research design*

Spirituality has been described in the literature as an individually experienced human strength or trait (Polemikou and Da Silva 2022), which may or may not manifest through

institutionalised religion (Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020), with lived and not infrequently expressed relationality at its core (Harris 2014; Jirásek 2023a, 2023b; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2019, 2020).

A qualitative approach seems to be appropriate for researching this phenomenon. The main aim of the research was to reflect on the concept of spiritual literacy in the conception of teachers and educators in preschool institutions based on the concept of forest kindergartens and the ways of projecting it into the educational processes in these institutions. Forest kindergartens (in Czech: 'lesní mateřské školy') are a relatively new form of alternative preschool education in the Czech Republic. Children spend most of their day in natural settings and the educational process emphasises experiential learning, environmental awareness, self-reliance, and holistic personal development (Kvapil 2012; Michek, Nováková, and Menclová 2015). No research has yet been conducted in the Czech Republic that focuses on spirituality in this type of kindergarten. Earlier studies (Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020; Robinson 2019, 2022; Schein 2013) suggest that spending time in nature can have a significant impact on the development of children's spirituality.

We asked the following research questions: 1. How do forest preschool teachers and educators perceive spirituality? 2. In what do forest preschool teachers and educators see developing spirituality in children? 3. How do they incorporate the development of spirituality into the educational process? Because we were interested in lived experience, a phenomenological perspective seemed to be the most appropriate framework. The phenomenological approach allows for a detailed exploration of subjective experience, but does not simply dwell on its description, but helps to reveal what meaning people ascribe to this experience in certain situations under certain conditions and what the shape of this process is.

### ***Data collection***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pre-school educators based on the concept of forest kindergartens to collect data. Each interview in the Czech language lasted 30–60 minutes and took place in the environment of the institution that the participants represented. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for later analysis. One interview was conducted by telephone and lasted 25 minutes. Interviews were conducted with six teachers, four of whom were from the institutions interviewed, and three others were approached on the recommendation of these teachers. The research was terminated after the six interviews had been conducted as there were no further research findings.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and March 2024. One interview was conducted by telephone due to the teacher's time commitment, while the other interviews have already been conducted in person. With the assumption of authenticity and quality of the information obtained, we chose to conduct the interviews in the background of each kindergarten and centre after hours, i.e., in an environment where educators felt relaxed and safe and which allowed for maximum openness. The telephone call was quicker compared to a face-to-face meeting; there was no direct

interaction. The call was in a calm environment, nothing was disturbed, and this participant also seemed to be as open and willing to share information as possible.

### **Research sample**

For this paper, a research sample of forest preschool educators was selected. The research sample was chosen deliberately, in light of the findings of previous research that depict a spiritual focus more in alternative educational institutions (Suchánková and Matušů 2020). And at the same time, it has already been found that preschool children's time in nature, for example in the form of family camping, opens up themes of spirituality and its natural experience (Jirásek, Čutová, and Jirásková 2025; Jirásek, Roberson, and Jirásková 2017). To maintain homogeneity of the research population, we selected only forest kindergartens that had a larger number of teachers willing to collaborate, although we also approached other alternative schools. A total of seven teachers were recruited. The research participants were selected based on their professional characteristics, age, and length of experience in preschool education. All participants had at least five years of experience in the field and demonstrated a personal interest in spiritual literacy.

Participants were contacted via email to inform them of the aims of the research and to request their participation. In the email, we described the focus of the research, and what their options for participation were. An informed consent form was sent to each participant, which contained detailed information about the research, the data processing methods and the assurance of anonymity. Based on the above criteria, we arranged a personal meeting with the selected participants by telephone and, after a brief introduction to the content of the upcoming interview, we conducted the interview.

Table 1 shows more detailed findings for the anonymised participants (with fictitious names), all of whom were women.

### **Data analysis**

Data processing was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which was chosen as a useful tool for understanding the unique human experience and the meaning respondents attach to that experience (Smith and Osborn 2015; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Compared to other qualitative approaches, IPA provides room for freedom in the research process as well as creativity, based on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA works with double hermeneutics, because the researcher tries to understand the participants who are trying to understand their world (Smith and Osborn 2015). IPA is

**Table 1.** Interview participants.

Name	Age	Total length of experience in years	Length of experience in forest preschool in years	Education	Location forest preschool
Alex	28	10	5	high school	village
Barbara	33	8	5	university	village
Coelestine	—	15	7	university	village
Darina	33	6	6	university	town
Evelina	38	10	8	—	town
Francis	—	8	6	high school	village

particularly useful in research involving an unusual situation, group of people, or data collection (Řiháček, Čermák, and Hytych 2013). The first step was our reflection on our own experience of the research topic in dialogue with ourselves in order to be able to set aside our own preconceptions to a certain extent. We reflected on our own experiences as preschool education practitioners and researchers in the context of the topic under investigation. We then proceeded to transcribe the interviews, capturing paralinguistic phenomena such as pauses, voice strength, and emphasis. During subsequent reading, the transcripts were supplemented with the researchers' initial notes (memos). Repeated reading with the support of listening to the recording led to a deeper understanding of the informants' perspectives, their subjective experiences, how they think about them, and how they interpret them. In the next phase, the most important information was underlined and the first codes that we considered significant were added directly to the transcript. Open coding was dynamic and non-linear; the initial codes were more descriptive in nature, gradually becoming more analytical. Subsequent repeated review of the codes and unification of terminology brought certain themes/contents to the fore. These were then sorted into meaningful categories. We gradually applied this procedure to all interviews. Finally, we identified several key themes that recurred in the interviews with kindergarten teachers. These are the personal journey to spirituality, the perception of spirituality, spirituality in childhood, love of nature, and the development of spiritual literacy in preschool education. In the conclusion, we focused on finding connections between the themes and examined how these elements intertwine and influence each other. The interviews and their analysis were conducted in Czech, and the resulting research report is presented in English. It is possible that some minor nuances of meaning (e.g., some dialectical lexis, ungrammatical expressions) may have been omitted in translation, but the meaning of the main message of the results remains.

### ***Research ethics***

The research was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Czech Republic and was governed by the rules of the Research Ethics Committee (SR 17/2023). All research participants were informed in advance of the nature of the research, the aim of the research and the use of the data obtained only for the purposes of this work and were informed of the possibility to withdraw from participation in the research at any time, even without giving a reason. Prior to the start of the interview, all participants were familiar with the audio recording and were also informed about the deletion of the interviews after their use. All research participants were guaranteed anonymity, all personal information was kept confidential and not shared with third parties. During data processing, all clues that could identify participants were changed and the information used was anonymised.

## **Results**

### ***Journey to spirituality***

Each educator has a unique story and experience of how her journey to discovering her inner spirituality unfolded. Some were able to identify the foundations of spirituality from

their childhood. For example, Darina grew up in a religious family and her childhood was greatly influenced by faith. Later in life, she began to question the deeper meaning of life. Evelina was also influenced by her family background. She spent time with her grandmother, who was very religious. They went to church together and talked about faith and similar matters. Like Darina, she discovered spirituality gradually and admits that it was 'a process and did not happen in one big flash of enlightenment'. Alex, on the other hand, had a rather negative experience with religion. As a teenager, she was strongly influenced by a high school classmate who 'came from an extremist family, staunch Christians, whom I also didn't like very much'. However, Alex cannot identify the beginnings of her own spirituality. In contrast, Coelestine has memories of her own experiences of spirituality from an early age. She always had a connection to nature and an interest in 'a deeper understanding of the world around her'. Her spiritual development took place gradually, thanks in part to encounters with inspiring people and her own reflection. She gradually 'formed her concept of spirituality' and the way she began to incorporate it into her life. But Francis, who grew up in a village where she spent time in nature with her siblings, only began to realise her spirituality when she started working in a forest kindergarten. The change of profession may have been crucial for the development of her spirituality. Barbara also began to feel a connection with her inner balance and values only after she came to the forest kindergarten, 'it just kind of evolved (...) that I was able to fully develop my spirituality here'. All the teachers describe their unique journey to spirituality as a process with similar milestones. The people they met in their personal and professional lives, the cultural and natural environment, and self-reflection were important.

### ***Perceptions of spirituality***

The unique path to one's own spirituality is reflected in the perspective from which teachers view spirituality as such. Although each teacher approaches it from a slightly different position, it seems that their views are focused in the same direction. Barbara emphasises the subjectivity of each person's spirituality, their personal disposition, and the connection to inner growth. She perceives spirituality as a very personal matter of 'turning to oneself, to nature, to one's surroundings'. Coelestine also perceives spirituality as a way of discovering the world and oneself in it. For her, it is 'a guide through life that helps to understand its deeper meaning and values'. Alex similarly describes spirituality as something internal that she tries to listen to and that cannot always be fully understood. Spirituality permeates all areas of her life; it is something that transcends her and at the same time is her very essence. 'Perhaps it is a kind of search for the meaning of life and truth, love, a kind of balance, nature; that is me.' She perceives spirituality as a constant search for the meaning of life, where the experience of searching is the meaning itself. Evelina also describes spirituality as an 'endless journey inward', where she finds wisdom and self-knowledge. Thanks to it, she finds harmony between body, mind, and spirit, which in turn 'allows her to live authentically and fully'. But she also sees spirituality in connection with nature, she sees it 'in every flower' and does not forget interpersonal relationships. She seeks connection and understanding between people, regardless of what they believe or what lifestyle they have. Darina connects her spirituality with religion. 'This faith really gives me direction and inspiration in my life.' For her, it is a meaningful, deep connection to something much greater, a feeling that is truly

important. She perceives spirituality as a search for meaning, depth, and connection on a personal, 'social, and cosmic level'. However, she is aware of the diversity of views on spirituality, which she considers completely natural and fine. For Francis, spirituality is an exploration of the deeper questions of existence and a search for connection with nature. For her, however, it is also an inner driving force that helps her face life's challenges. She sees it as a normal part of life, the awareness that we are a natural part of a whole that is greater than ourselves. Although spirituality has a slightly different meaning for each educator in specific aspects, they all associate it with the search for meaning in life and a connection with that which transcends them and of which they are also a part.

### ***The emerging spirituality of children***

All research participants are in daily contact with children. They agree that manifestations of children's spirituality can be observed in their behaviour, relationships and interests. Alex mentions that these elements can be perceived if children are provided with the right environment, a sense of security, and enough time and space, when teachers 'do not interfere'. According to her, children 'just need space to express themselves'. Barbara observes children's spirituality in their relationships with each other and with nature, in their ability to 'create something' while 'behaving nicely, with love and great consideration'. Coelestine talks about children's perceptive relationship with nature. She describes their ability to discover and perceive the beauty and wonders of nature around them, 'when children touch plants, listen to the rustling of trees, or observe animals'. Darina recognises children's spirituality by 'the light of joy in their eyes' and their natural ability to be fully present. She observes spirituality when children are completely immersed in what they see, hear, and feel. Evelina is also aware of children's limited vocabulary when trying to share their spiritual experiences. She illustrates spirituality directly through authentic statements made by children, such as 'Look how the tree bends so that the fish have something to drink.' The power of children's spirituality is also evident in authentic children's questions, such as 'Can I feel the energy of this flower? How do I do that?'. Francis offers a different perspective, seeing children's developing spirituality in seemingly mundane little gestures, such as how they care for plants. But she, too, is able to accept the children's perspective when they 'simply talk to our forest creatures, even if it may seem like a figment of their imagination'. In her experience and observation, children spontaneously touch deeper levels of life and try to share these inner experiences.

### ***Love of nature***

The theme of nature permeated all the interviews. Nature is seen as an important refuge and a powerful place for creating bonds between children and nature. Alex sees nature as an amazing place away from all the usual hustle and bustle. She believes that forest kindergartens are the ideal place for developing a love of nature. Coelestine adds that the outdoor environment as a place of learning and work offers not only a connection with nature but also unique experiences that support children's sensory and emotional development. Children can find inner peace and harmony in nature by connecting with their own feelings and values. Coelestine also sees a love of nature 'in the enthusiastic expressions on the faces' of children when they share their experiences and knowledge of

nature. Francis describes children's relationship with nature in an interesting way. She notices children's respect for nature, for example, when they come to the forest and suddenly fall silent, as if 'listening to something more than just the rustling of trees'. She also describes the unusual feelings of playing in the forest, which was like 'a little ritual in which we created a connection between ourselves, nature, and animals'. Love for nature is therefore not just a feeling, but rather an overall approach and openness to connecting children with nature through everyday coexistence, understanding, and respect. Barbara completes the picture from the perspective of teachers who also try to take into account the environmental and sustainable aspects of love for nature. She points out that we also need to be aware of how we can 'use nature sparingly, not just take what it gives us'. Each of the teachers has her own multi-layered view of nature and her love for it, but there is agreement on the irreplaceable role of nature in the development of children's spirituality.

### ***Spiritual literacy in preschool education***

Teachers agree on the importance of supporting the development of children's spiritual literacy in preschool education. They seem to be successful in striking a balance between allowing children's spirituality to emerge spontaneously by creating suitable conditions and implementing certain types of activities in a targeted and systematic manner during guided activities.

Darina is very aware of the holistic aspect of preschool education. According to her, it is important 'not only what we learn, but also how we feel and how we perceive the world around us'. She purposefully conducts morning meditations with the children or a short prayer before meals. She also emphasises the importance of festive moments. Birthday celebrations or 'natural holidays, such as the autumn solstice, remind us that we are part of a larger whole, that we belong to something'.

Francis tries to incorporate spirituality in a sensitive manner. She listens openly to the unique experiences and imaginations of children, which are the starting point for her planned activities. During these activities, she focuses the children's attention back on their perception and reflection of the world with its laws and mysteries. For example, observing dead animals in the forest can be the beginning of conversations about life and death and their subsequent artistic processing, which also allows for the expression of experiences that cannot be put into words. She comments on her approach with the words, 'Some things happen really spontaneously (...), but then there are planned activities where I try to pull the strings a little'.

Similarly, Alex says that although she deliberately does not include spirituality, she is open to it, 'I don't set boundaries, I don't forbid the influence of this spirituality'. She deliberately does not try to convey any particular attitudes or opinions. Rather, she tries to show children that they should love themselves, even with their own weaknesses. Only in this way is it possible to build mutual respect, love, and a willingness to help each other. She thus develops the children's spirituality through her relationship with them and the values she herself follows in her life.

Barbara also has a very open and individualised approach to children. Behind this approach is a deep-rooted negative attitude towards traditional institutionalised education, where, according to her, there is still undesirable comparison of

performance and classification of children. On the contrary, she herself tries to recognise the uniqueness, interests, and needs of each child. By respecting individuality, she promotes values associated with spirituality, such as respect for oneself and others, empathy, and harmony with the surrounding world. She also emphasises children's practical experiences and perceives learning as a long-term process during which children become aware of their gradual progress. And that is 'important in learning'.

Coelestine is probably the most focused on promoting the spiritual development of children. It strives to create an environment that is 'full of inspiration, wonder, and a deeper understanding of the world around us'. Its goal is for children to have the opportunity to discover and develop their inner world, perceive the beauty and harmony in their surroundings, and 'find joy in connection with nature and their loved ones'. Coelestine takes spiritual development seriously and deliberately, using exploratory activities in her teaching to feed children's natural desire to understand the world they live in, which fills them with wonder and amazement. Coelestine also uses simple breathing and visualisation techniques that allow children to 'find peace and focus on their inner feelings and thoughts'. However, she also allows children plenty of time for spontaneous creation using natural materials and free play in a natural environment. During these activities, the children have often shown her 'the importance of the present moment and the joy of life'.

Teachers use various means for the spiritual development of children, from working outdoors and creating with natural materials to meditation, visualisation, and rituals. The research participants agree that these activities promote creativity, empathy, and the development of children's inner worlds. They also strengthen relationships between children and teachers and create an environment of love, respect, and understanding. For all research participants, the key elements are the transmission of values, respect for nature, and support for children's individual development.

## Discussion

Our research presents some of the first findings on the topic of spiritual literacy in pre-primary education in the context of a secular Czech society. We asked the research questions How do forest preschool teachers and educators perceive spirituality? What do forest preschool teachers and educators see as the developing spirituality in children? How do they integrate the development of spirituality into the educational process? Forest preschool educators were shown to reflect on the spiritual dimension of themselves, to perceive manifestations of developing spirituality in children, and to intentionally incorporate activities that support the flourishing of spirituality in children.

Participants were able to identify important relationships in childhood and adolescence, natural contact with nature and the Christian cultural tradition as sources of their own spirituality.

However, Christian faith as a source of personal spirituality was not explicitly reflected in anyone's work with children. After all, the complexity of the relationship between religion and spirituality has long been consciously reflected upon (Polemikou and Da Silva 2022). In the strongly atheistic Czech society, however, the effort to consistently separate the two is desirable and advantageous. It seems that our society may be more sensitive to

possible religious indoctrination, which it may unconsciously preserve as a dark side of power relations, which it projects, for example, onto religion as such ( ).

In surfacing and shaping their own spirituality, educators operate with notions of process, self-reflection, and the larger whole. All participants identified relationality in formulating their own concept of spirituality. Relationality, as a key concept that is steadily entrenched in scholarly discourse, comes to the fore in our findings. Relationality to self, other people, nature and the greater whole (Harris 2014; Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2019, 2020) may thus become a mainstream consideration in thinking about developing spiritual literacy beyond early childhood education (Jirásek 2023a, 2023b; Polemikou and Da Silva 2022).

The reflection of the spirituality of preschool educators is clearly directed towards the resources in childhood and implicitly includes questions about the formation of conditions for the development of spiritual literacy at an early age. It also shapes frameworks for understanding childhood being in the context of spirituality through one's own life journey and acquired epistemological stance (Rouse 2024; Rouse and Hyde 2024).

Forest preschool educators see children's developing spirituality particularly in their relationship to nature, the expression of virtuous relationships with peers, and inquiry into the deeper dimensions of life. A clear sign of the manifestation of developing spiritual literacy is children's interest in nature and the love of nature that children experience and express. Furthermore, the ability to discover nature's beauty and to rejoice in new discoveries within it (Harris 2014; Mata-McMahon 2019; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020). Participants also mentioned the children's ability to find harmony and peace in the natural environment (Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020), as well as being able to describe creativity and imagination when working with nature and caring for it with compassion.

Children's spirituality was also captured by forest preschool educators as a capacity for compassion, which was manifested in their behaviours such as caring not only for peers but also for living nature. Indeed, virtuous behaviours such as empathy, love, compassion, or altruism have been captured as part of their manifestations of spirituality in previous research (Binder 2011; Goodliff 2013; King 2010; Robinson 2022). Children seem to be no strangers to displays of virtuous behaviour that resemble adult behaviour while demonstrating children's ability to step outside of themselves and actively participate in building interpersonal relationships (Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2020).

Our research has also found that educators believe that children's spirituality may also be reflected in their ability to spontaneously touch deeper levels of life. At the same time, children show a desire to share these inner experiences, even though they do not yet have the tools to do so (Chin-Kin Lee 2020; Gondáš 2020). However, this should not limit educators in perceiving and developing children's awakening spirituality, for example, through artistic activities, which 'can be viewed as the unconscious language of the soul of humanity which transcends racial, cultural and religious boundaries' (de Souza 2016, p.134). It is desirable to meet these immature attempts at sharing with genuine interest (Robinson 2022). If we are looking for ways to develop and cultivate children's spiritual literacy, this seems to be one possible way, which, moreover, solves the problem of the impossibility of conceiving the human spiritual dimension as a subject/field of education. Discussions with children over deep human experiences and big questions can support the development of their ability to find meaning in their own existence (Mata-McMahon,

Haslip, and Schein 2020). However, an obstacle may be the school environment, which is a product of the era when institutionalised education was established, as well as our perception of children as insufficiently mature to be accompanied on their journey of finding their own identity in the context of the community and the world (de Souza, 2016). We believe that such mistrust against the backdrop of the common adult or teacher perspective can be misleading and limit the appropriate development of children's spiritual literacy.

So what procedures are desirable? In our research, participants mentioned varying degrees of activity management. Some were able to rely more on children's spontaneous activities outdoors in nature, others focused on creating appropriate opportunities. Participants purposefully incorporated discussions, creative activities, meditation, relaxation and breathing exercises, visualisation, prayer, celebration of holidays or imagery into the educational process. These research findings are also consistent with those of Mata-McMahon (2019).

However, equally important, according to our findings, is giving children enough time for their own spontaneous activities, allowing them to actively and creatively co-create the world (Sevón 2015). Children's free play, spontaneous, open-ended activities, and unguided outdoor activities are often identified as contexts in which spiritual literacy manifests itself and allows for its development in interaction with peers (Harris 2014; Mata-McMahon 2019; Robinson et al. 2025) and develops children's personal and social skills in a feedback-based way (de Souza 2016; Robinson et al. 2025), skills that are so desirable for life in a globalised world (Šíp 2020). Our participants' statements also revealed that they perceive spirituality as a complex phenomenon that affects the overall development of the child (Jirásek 2023a, 2023b; Polemikou and Da Silva 2022). In promoting the development and cultivation of spiritual literacy in preschool education, our findings also suggest that it is desirable to accept children's imperfect ability to verbally express their deep experiences and thoughts.

After all, personal spiritual experience is, by its very nature, difficult to communicate in words (Němečková 2016), which is further reflected in the absence of a commonly shared narrative that would lead to the cultivation of spirituality in secular societies. Instead of religion, which is used as a tool of power and is unable to respond to the current period of global polycrisis, attention could be turned to philosophical education. This could elegantly reduce the risks associated with manifestations of uncultivated spirituality and its ties to religious institutions and doctrines (Němečková 2024), which can dangerously feed the dark side of spirituality (de Souza 2012, 2016).

We believe that it is appropriate to direct part of the reflection on supporting the development of spirituality towards sensitising educators (Robinson et al. 2025) to the imperfect expression of spirituality in children and to functional frameworks that could reflect and integrate individual spiritual experiences into everyday life, not only at school. The cultural and natural environment and its qualities influence the formation and cultivation of children's spirituality, which extends into their adulthood. In a time of alienation from nature, cultural traditions, and people, especially in the Czech secular and strongly atheistic society in the context of not entirely successful efforts to improve the quality of education, the dynamics of the relationship between the self and the environment appear to be essential. This presents a challenge not only for preschool education in creating conditions for cultivating spiritual literacy, but also for the overall

concept of education in the Czech Republic. Without a gradual and thoughtful change in the outdated school system, current empirical findings and the ideas based on them often fall on barren ground. They can easily become a 'parody of themselves' (Šíp 2020, 439). Such devaluation of important findings only reinforces the distrust of pedagogical practice towards pedagogical research and theory. It therefore seems that research into children's spirituality can be an important catalyst and argument for the much-desired and so far not very successful reform of the school system.

### **Limitations**

The research findings represent a relatively small and specific group of educators from pre-schools built on the forest kindergarten concept. This type of preschool education is characterised by the environment in which the educational process takes place, as well as the operation of the schools themselves. The framework of education is the outdoor natural environment, the schools are usually smaller, single-class, and the group of children is heterogeneous in age. Compared to other types of schools, there is a higher ratio of educators to a smaller group of children.

One of the main limitations of this study is the sample size, which included only six female teachers from forest kindergartens. Such a small sample limits the generalisability of the findings, yet it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Given the small number of participants, there is also a higher risk of subjective bias – individual extreme opinions or personal experiences could disproportionately influence the overall picture provided by the research.

Another limitation is the homogeneity of the sample – all participants were women with similar professional backgrounds. This may affect the diversity of perspectives, particularly regarding the understanding of spirituality and the ways it is integrated into education. Men, teachers with different educational backgrounds, or those from other types of preschools might approach these issues differently. However, considering that the proportion of men among preschool teachers in the Czech Republic is very low – only 0.68% in the 2023/24 school year (ČSÚ 2024, 'Školy a školská zařízení – Analytická část') – it is difficult to achieve a gender-balanced perspective.

Thus, in line with the qualitative nature of the research, the data and findings obtained are appropriate to the research population and the time and place of implementation. Although we believe that our findings can contribute to the understanding of promoting the spiritual dimension in preschool education, further research in this area is desirable.

### **Conclusion**

Our research sought to answer the question of how preschool educators conceptualise children's spiritual literacy and what strategies they use to develop it. The research suggests that educators perceive children's developing spiritual literacy and seek to promote it through a variety of activities and approaches in the educational setting. Some educators consider spiritual literacy as an important element of children's personal development, while others focus more on hands-on activities related to nature and creative learning. The

integration of spiritual literacy into the educational process is seen as a means of promoting the overall development of the child and enhancing his or her personal and social skills. Our findings reflect existing knowledge and reopen questions about the appropriate approach to developing children's spiritual literacy. The question arose of preschool teachers' sensitivity to children's imperfect expressions of spirituality, desirable changes in the school environment, and the possibility of applying philosophical education as early as preschool age.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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