A young child with curly hair, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, is smiling and playing with colorful blocks (red, green, blue, yellow) on a table. Other children are visible in the background, also playing with blocks. The scene is set in a classroom or playroom.

**SPIRITUALITY THE
NORTH STAR: HOW
CAN WE SUPPORT
SPIRITUALITY IN THE
SECULAR
CLASSROOM?**

NAEYC
Nashville, TN Nov. 2023

Jennifer Mata-McMahon, EdD
Associate Professor
UMBC



Setting an
Intention (10
mins)

ACTIVITY — GUIDED MEDITATION

A row of lit candles in glass holders, each containing dried flowers. The candles are in various colors: red, purple, orange, blue, yellow, and light blue. The scene is dimly lit, with the candle flames providing the primary light source. The background is dark and out of focus, showing more dried flowers. The text "MEDITATION FOR MINDFULNESS" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font, centered over the candles. A thin white vertical line is positioned to the right of the text.

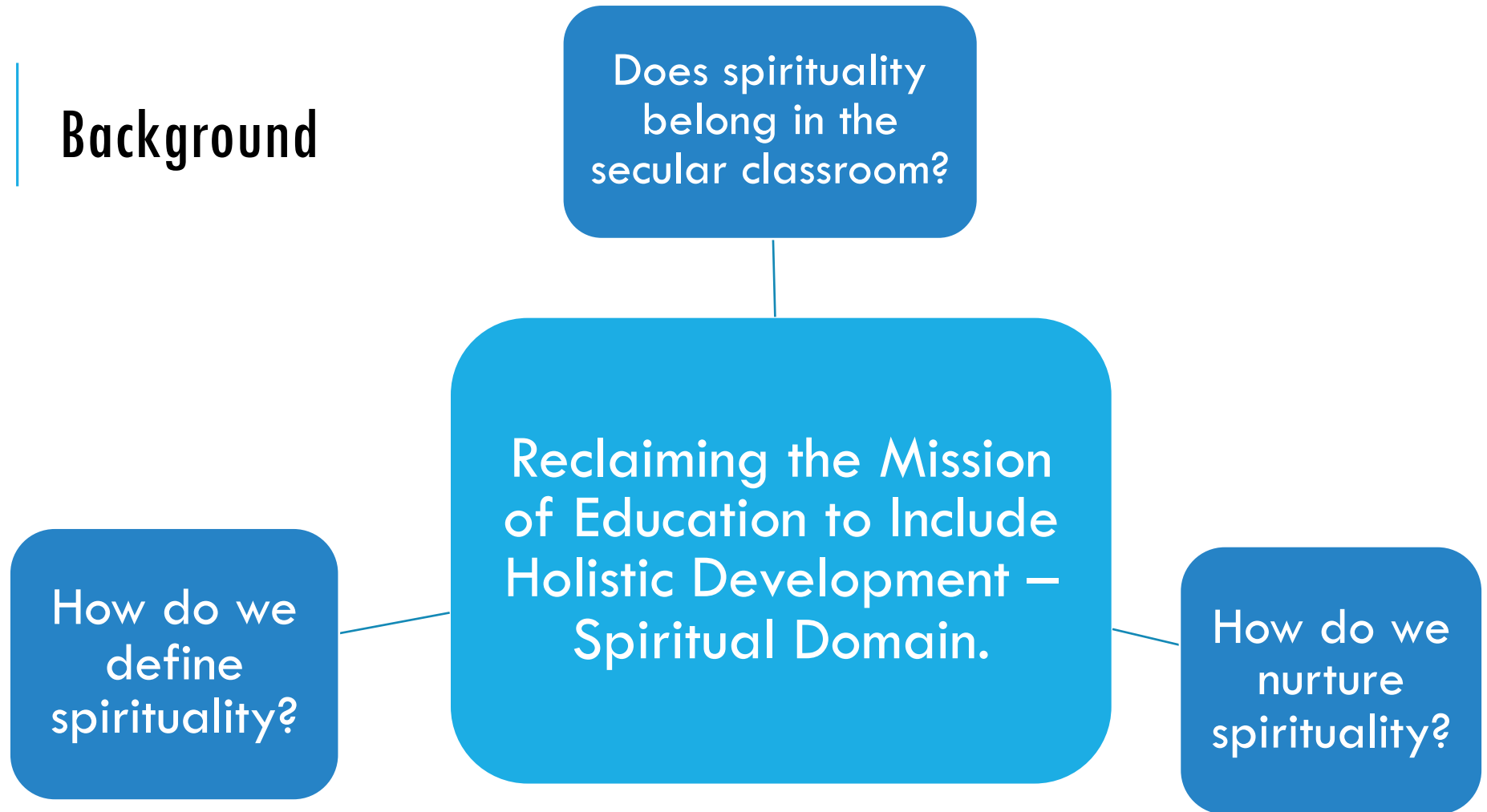
**MEDITATION FOR
MINDFULNESS**

A watercolor illustration of a Native American figure, possibly a woman, with a starburst or compass rose background. The figure is wearing a patterned dress and has a serene expression. The background is a mix of blue and purple tones with circular patterns. The text "SPIRITUALITY — THE NORTH STAR FOR EDUCATION" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font. A vertical white line is positioned to the right of the text.

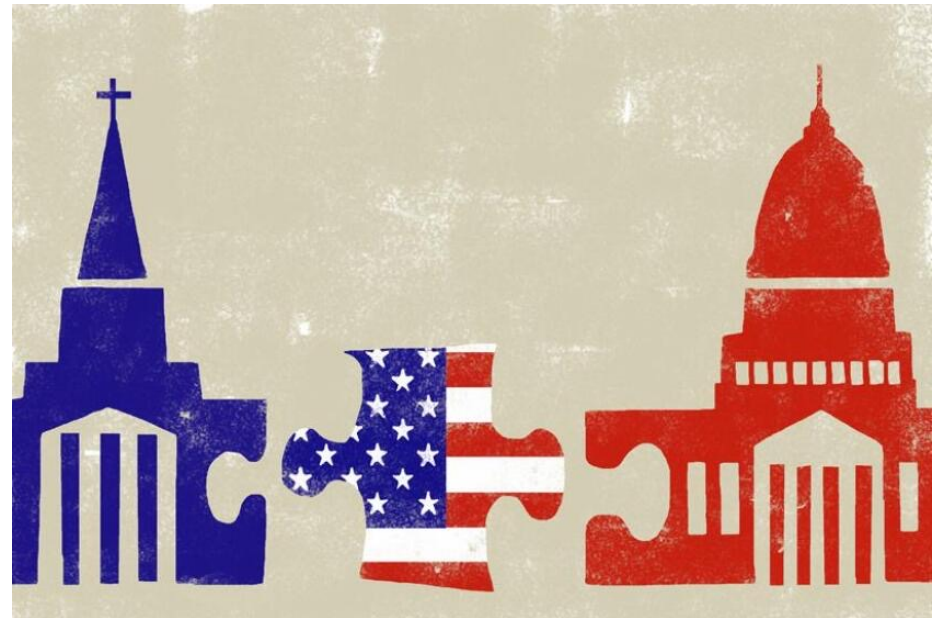
SPIRITUALITY — THE NORTH STAR FOR EDUCATION


Background

Background



UNDERSTANDING OUR CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS



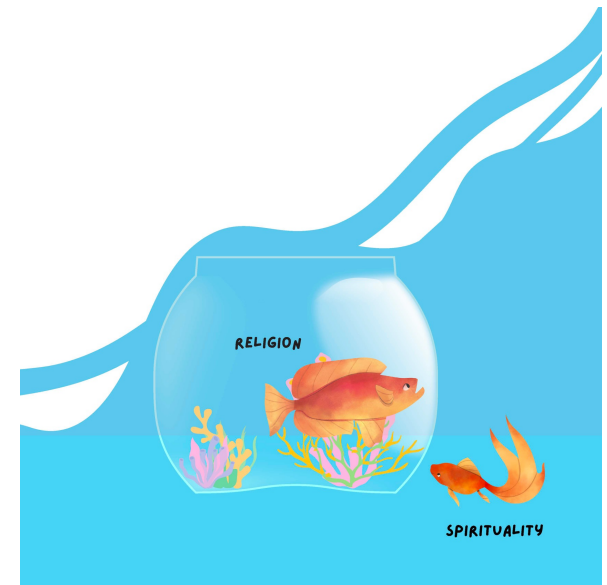


**WHAT DOES
SPIRITUALITY
MEAN TO YOU?**

RELIGION vs. SPIRITUALITY

Religion: a set of beliefs and practices generally held by a human community, involving adherence to codified beliefs and rituals (Oxford Dictionary, 2005)

Spirituality: an innate human characteristic that allows us to relate and connect with the transcendent or higher power, beyond our minds and emotions, in order to feel part of something greater than ourselves (Bosacki, 2001; Hart, 2003; Lantieri, 2001; Miller, 2000; Myers & Myers, 1999)




Mata-McMahon & Escarfuller, (2024)



SPIRITUALITY

“Spirituality is an innate human characteristic, a potential we are all born with, which allows us to connect with something beyond us (transcendence or the divine), feel part of the greater universe, and be connected to otherness. Spirituality encompasses the individual capacity and the essence of life, providing humans with a window to greater consciousness and more profound understanding of being, meaning, and purpose.” (Mata, 2015, p. 18)

- 
- Innate human characteristic
 - A potential
 - Allows to connect: self, others, Other
 - Window to greater consciousness
 - To find meaning and purpose in life


SPIRITUALITY

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SPIRITUALITY

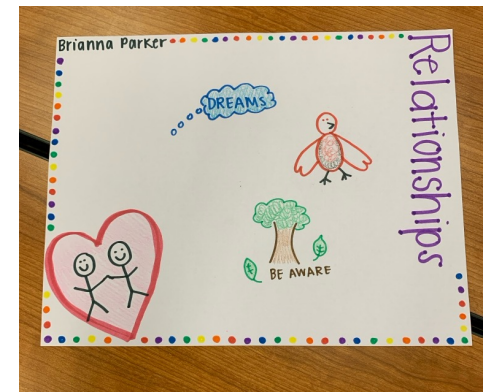
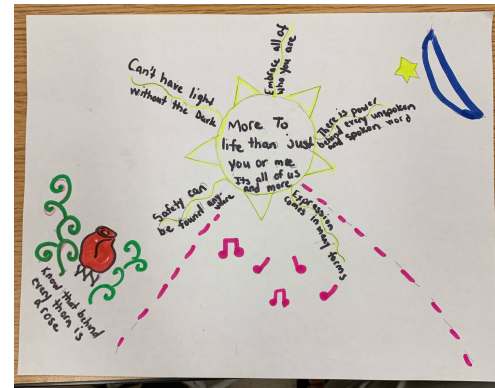
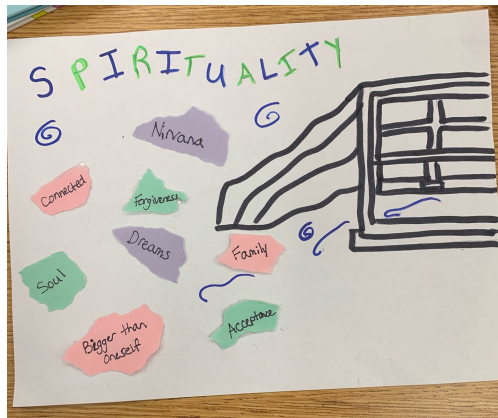
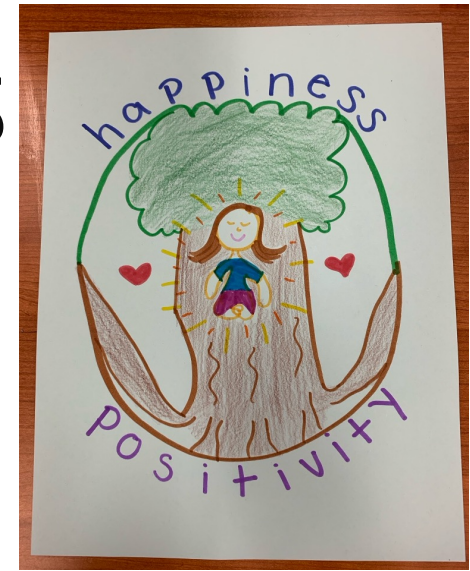
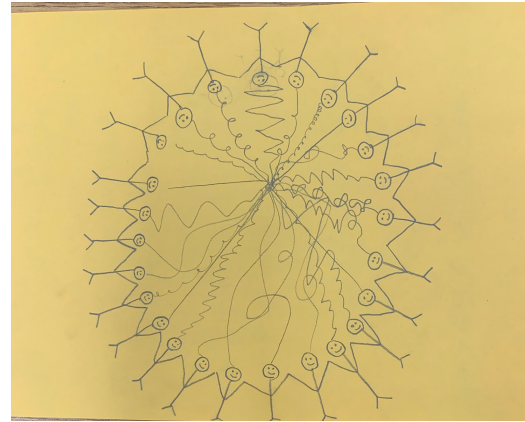
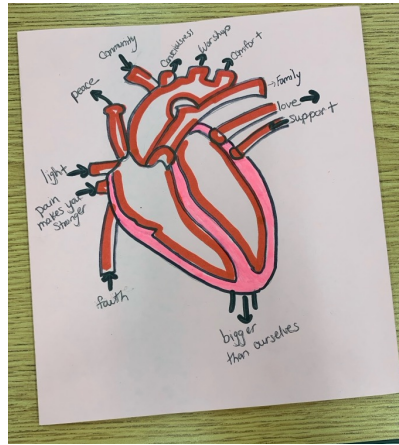
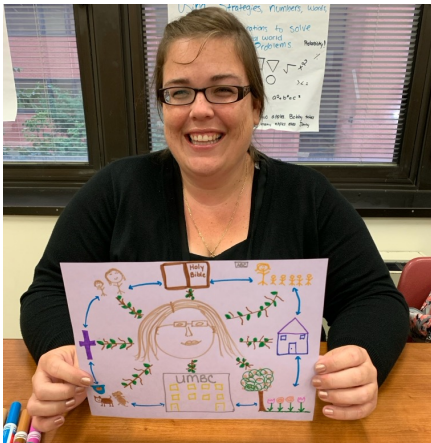
“Spirituality, or the spirit, is the innate light or life within that is nurtured through love, facilitates connections and relationships, and expresses itself by ways of wonder, joy and compassion, among many other virtues and manifestations. It follows that the spirit expresses itself in everyday moments and interests. It also follows that spirituality can be cultivated and nurtured by providing a beautiful environment, loving relationships, opportunities for joy and wonder and by fostering the emergence of virtues (character strengths) expressing the spirit..” (Mata-McMahon, Haslip & Schein, 2018, p. 4)

- 
- Innate light within.
 - Nurtured through love.
 - Facilitates connections.
 - Expresses itself through virtues.
 - Expresses itself through everyday moments and interests.

SPIRITUALITY

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PRE-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS



IN-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS - CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

“Children’s spirituality is understood by early childhood educators to be connections with others, with nature and the universe; the practice of virtues such as love, forgiveness, and compassion; making meaning of life through curiosity and questioning; can include identifying with God and religion; self-awareness, mindfulness and presence; as a part of being human, and as an expression of feelings such as wonder and awe. This represents a multidimensional definition of children’s spirituality that highlights early childhood educators’ complex understanding of this concept, illustrating the multiple layers involved in this phenomenon.” (Mata-McMahon, Haslip & Schein, 2020)

IN-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS - CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

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FINDINGS

What do you understand
children's spirituality to be?
(n=33)

Themes	Codes/Concepts
1. Connections (20)	Connections to Others, Relationship with Nature and Connections to the Universe
2. Practicing Virtues (19)	Love, Forgiveness, Compassion
3. Making-Meaning (15)	Curiosity, Meaning-Making, Questioning
4. God and Religion (11)	God, Bible, Angels
5. Self-awareness (6)	
6. Mindfulness and Presence (5)	
7. Humanness (4)	
8. Inner feelings (4)	Feelings, Wondrousness, Wonder, awe and reverence for the natural world
9. Not sure, no answer (4)	

IN-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR — CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

“While analyzing the responses to Q7, researchers found that participants approached the question from distinctively different perspectives. Some respondents spoke of the essence of spirituality, reflecting on what it meant at its core; others shared where they thought spirituality stemmed from, explaining where it originates for children; and others reflected on how spirituality prompted children to act toward others and their environment. Noting these different approaches to responding to the question, a response framework was developed, including three types of responses: those focused on the core essence of the concept of children’s spirituality (grouped as Essence); those focused on the source of children’s spirituality, and where it originates from (grouped as Origin); and those who identified children’s behaviors that could be considered spiritual, as well as actions to engage in and develop spiritually as the way in which they defined children’s spirituality (grouped as Actions). These broad types of responses included different categories, codes, and subcodes.” (Mata-McMahon, Haslip & Hossain, under revision)

IN-SERVICE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR — CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

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FINDINGS

What do you understand children's spirituality to be?
(n=318)

Response Framework Group/Category	f
Essence	201
Mystical	106
Self	61
Values	23
Purpose, Meaning & Role	11
Origin	122
External	72
Internal	50
Action	86
Toward Others	50
Toward their Surroundings	13
Religious Mindset & Practices	12
Meditation & Mindfulness	6
Playing & Discussing	5
No Answer	31
Children do not Understand Spirituality	4

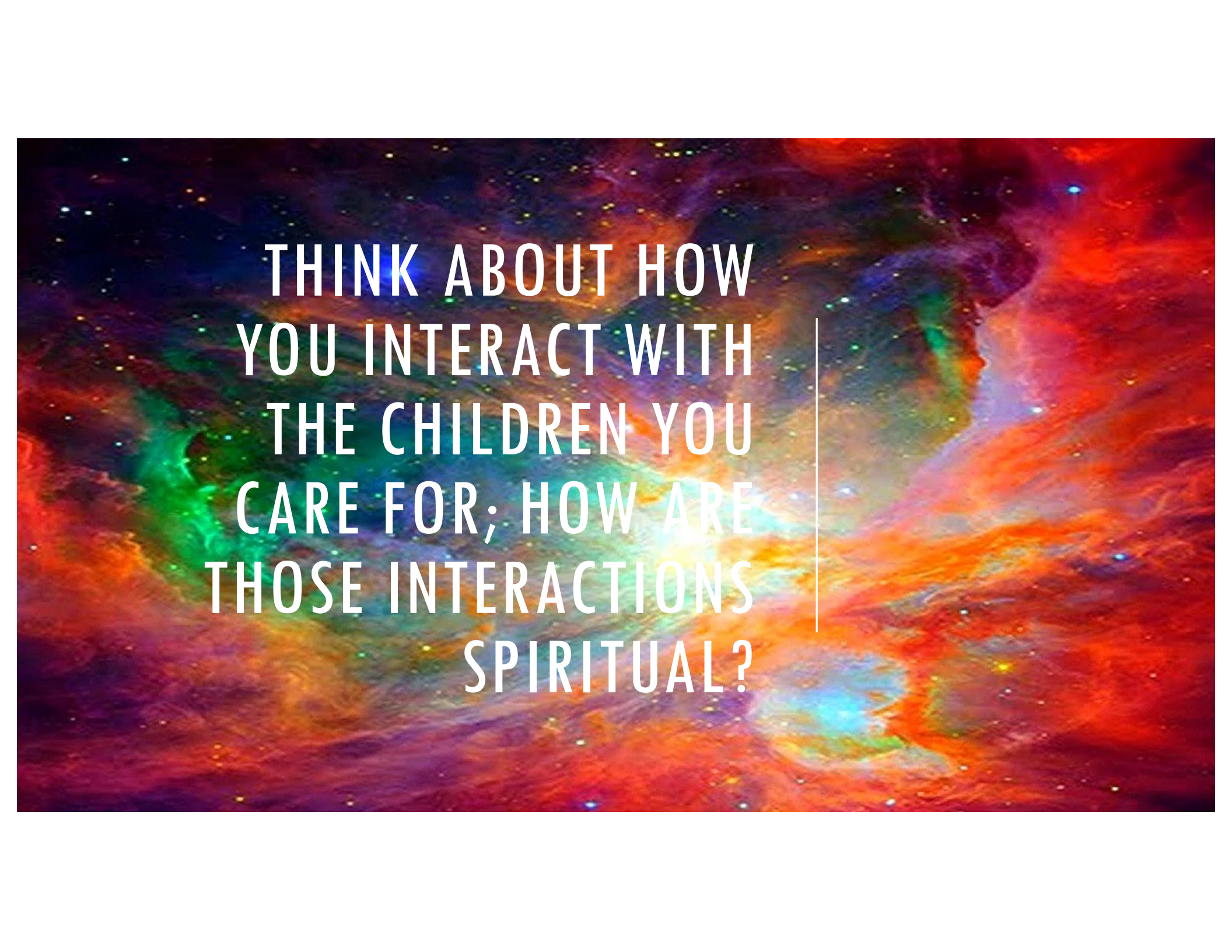


**THINK ABOUT THE
CHILDREN YOU TEACH
AND CARE FOR, HOW
ARE THEY SPIRITUAL?**



How do you
define children's
spirituality?

ACTIVITY — THINK, WRITE, PAIR,
SHARE



THINK ABOUT HOW
YOU INTERACT WITH
THE CHILDREN YOU
CARE FOR; HOW ARE
THOSE INTERACTIONS
SPIRITUAL?

RESEARCH STUDY

The project grew from a holistic understanding of child development and the need to know how early childhood educators understand children's spirituality to best support them in nurturing it in educational settings.



1. Determine strategies, activities or techniques being used by in-service early childhood educators that are thought to align with nurturing children's spirituality.
2. Determine in-service early childhood educators' intentionality to support children's spirituality in the early childhood classroom.
3. Determine the willingness of in-service early childhood educators to intentionally support children's spirituality in the early childhood classroom.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Section I: Spiritual Views and Practices

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?


	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Spirituality is important to me, in my life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Spirituality is important for children.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Schools should nurture children's spirituality.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Children's spirituality should be nurtured only at home.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Spirituality is an inherent domain of human life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



ECE-SPC

Five sections of questions are identified with the following topics:

- Section I: Spiritual Views and Practices
- Section II: Activities and Curriculum (teaching strategies and techniques)
- Section III: Classroom Environment and Schedule
- Section IV: Interaction and Experiences (in school and around the community)
- Section V: Demographic Information

A photograph of a teacher sitting at a desk in a classroom, working on a laptop. The teacher is a Black woman with curly hair, wearing a light-colored blazer. She is looking at the laptop screen and has her hand on a document. The desk is cluttered with a laptop, a pen holder with markers, a sticky note, and a globe. In the background, there are several rows of wooden desks and chairs, some with papers and books on them. The lighting is soft and focused on the teacher.

PLANNING TO NURTURE SPIRITUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM



CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

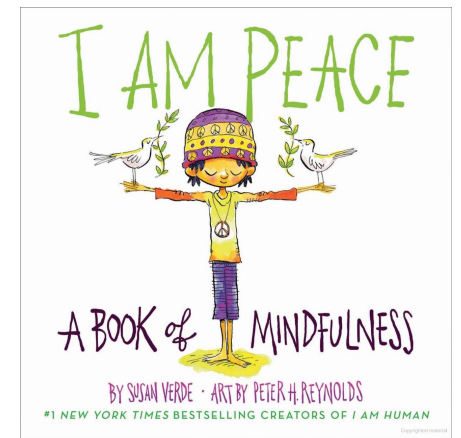
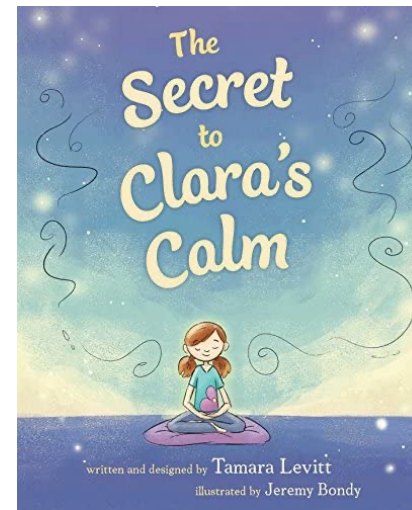
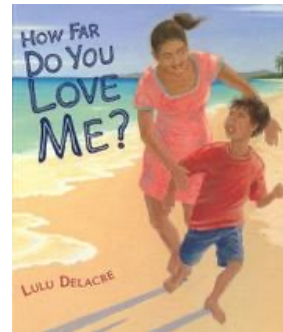
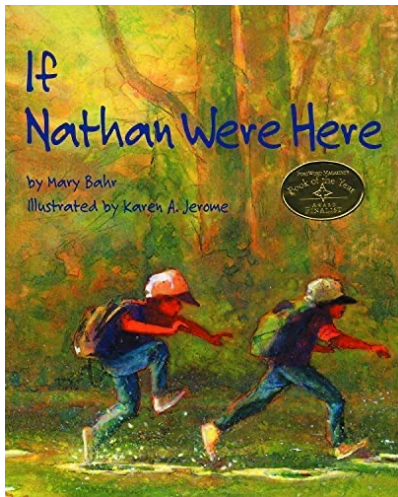
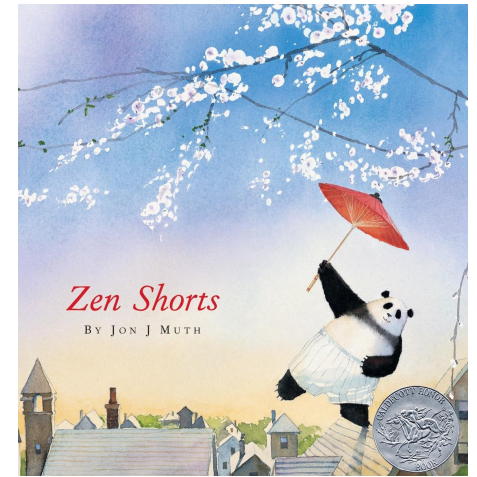
- Aesthetics – Visual appearance
- Layout/Space
- Furniture/Décor
- Organization of Materials



CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

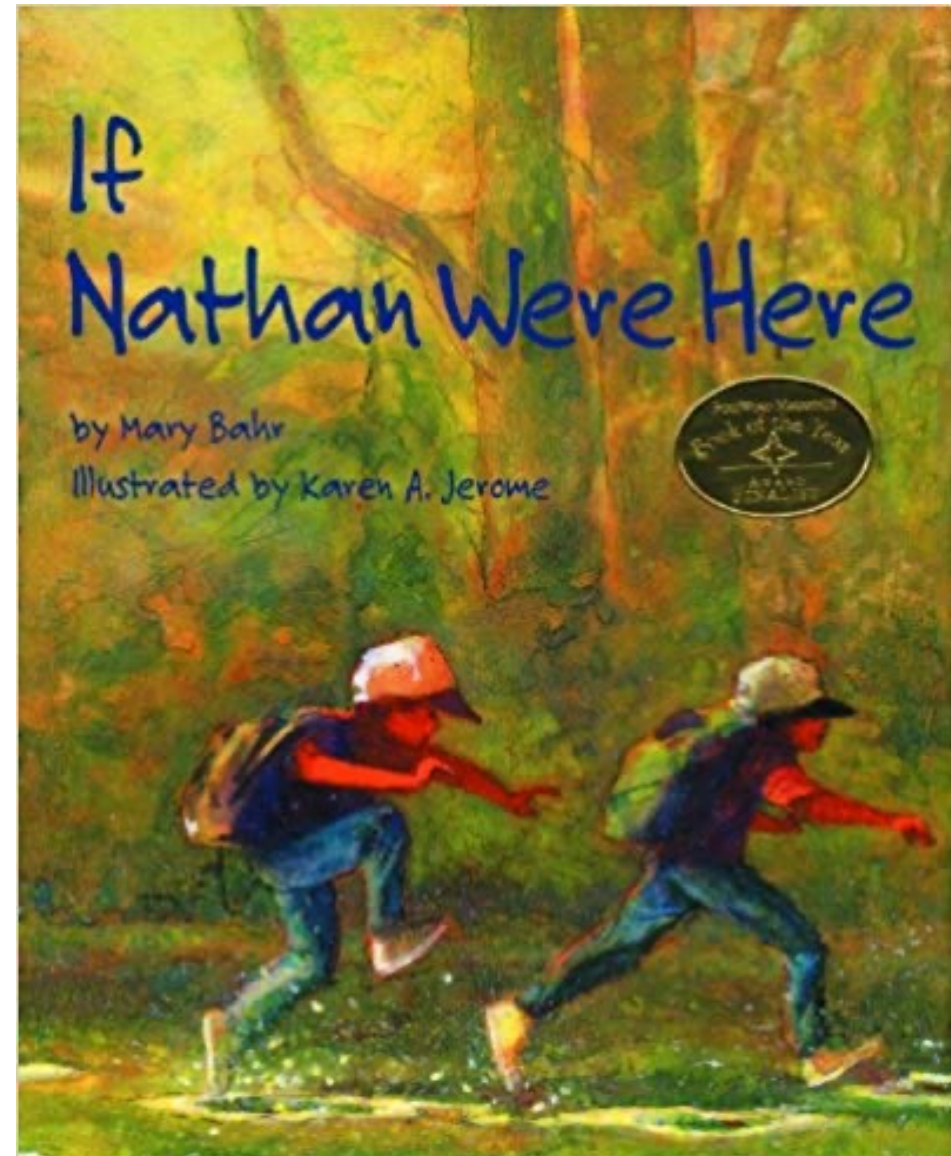
- Ambiance
- Sounds/Background Music
- Scents/Aromatherapy
- Bringing in Nature: Plants and Pets

CHILDREN'S BOOKS



STORYTIME

How might this story help nurture the spirit of the child?





MUSIC

Children singing I
Think You're
Wonderful (with
animal video)

We Are A Family
(with sign language
that children can
mirror) by Jack
Hartmann



Nothing less than excellent



Spirit Lab

MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

In a Seminar I teach to pre-service educators on Issues of Early Child Education, I introduce the topic of Children's Spirituality, and ask my students to complete an assignment in which they carry out a Meditation Project with the children they teach in their internship sites. In order to provide them with the tools to facilitate meditation for mindfulness purposes for their students, I provide my students with a weekly meditation technique for them to have personal experiences with practicing meditation. Here, I share the techniques I recorded for my students for each of our seminar sessions. These are not necessarily sequential techniques, the technique numbers represent the weeks in the semester in which they are introduced, yet they need not be practiced in that specific order. If there is a technique you prefer and feel more comfortable with, you might wish to repeat that technique and perhaps skip others you do not feel drawn to. Each technique has a duration of approximately 10 minutes.



- ▶ **Meditation Technique #1 (Guided Breath Meditation)**
Dr. Jennifer Mata-McMahon
- ▶ **Meditation Technique #2 (Tension Releasing)**
Dr. Jennifer Mata-McMahon
- ▶ **Meditation Technique #3 (Confronting Fears)**
Dr. Jennifer Mata-McMahon



The Digital Goodie Bag!

www.drjenmata.com



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Stemming from the Constructed Definition of Children's Spirituality:

1. Offer opportunities for building deep Connections and Relationships with Others
2. Cultivate a feeling of reverence for Nature
3. Offer opportunities for children to practice love, forgiveness, compassion, non-judgmental, respect, care, kindness, empathy, acceptance, and honesty.
4. Encourage children's curiosity and questioning to support their meaning-making.
5. Foster an environment to explore new ideas, beliefs, and perceptions.
6. Respect children's relationship with God and religious views.
7. Promote children's discovery of self.
8. Include quiet time, mindfulness, and breathing activities.
9. Honor the child's spiritual nature by providing space and time for play, music, dancing, and art.
10. Encourage children to express their inner-feelings.

We invite you to incorporate these practices with ALL children you work with.

#EQUITYinECE

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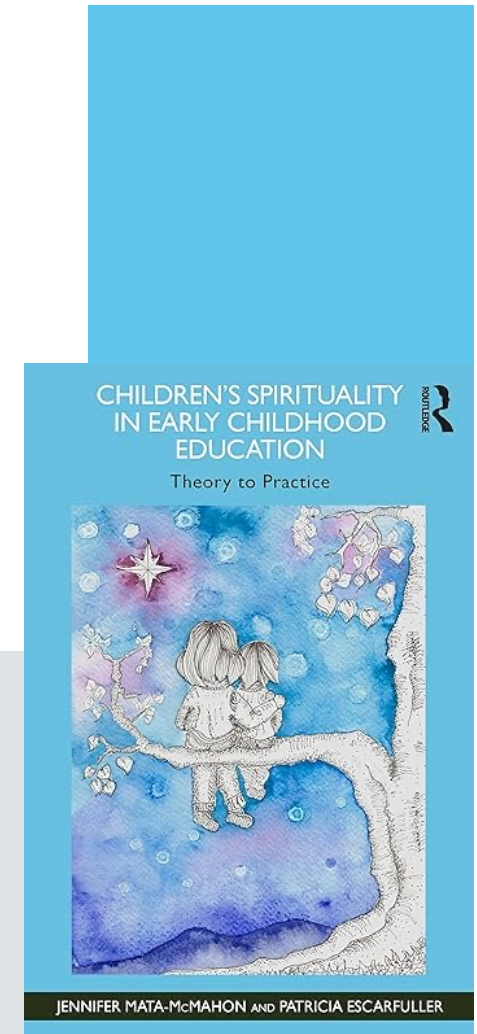
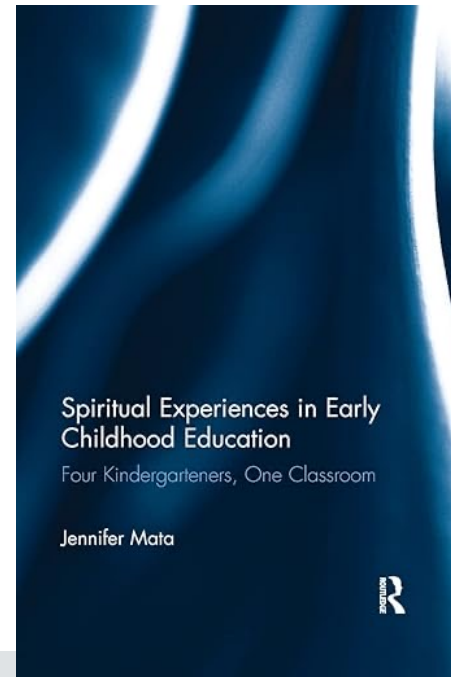
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THANK YOU!

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