



THE JOURNEY HOME: ODYSSEY-BASED THEATRICAL PLAY AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOME, RELATIONSHIPS, AND BELONGING IN A MULTIPLE-CASE PILOT STUDY

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Abstract:

Home is both a material place and a relational setting shaped by memory, emotion, everyday activity, and belonging. This exploratory qualitative multiple-case study examined how 15 participants aged 6–14 years, described for the purposes of the study as having mild cognitive difficulties, represented home before and after an eight-week Odyssey-based theatrical-play programme. Participants were organised into three age groups (6–8, 9–11, and 12–14 years; n = 5 per group). Before the programme, each participant drew a house, a tree, and a person and responded to four open-ended questions after each drawing. The tree and person materials were used only as contextual elicitation. After 16 theatrical-play sessions, the house task and the same four questions were repeated. Analysis treated drawings and verbal accounts as related but distinct sources of evidence and focused on observable elaboration, human presence, relationships, emotional meaning, narrative organisation, and visual-verbal

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convergence. Simple counts and percentages were used only for clearly identifiable verbal patterns. Explicit named family or interpersonal relationships in the house account were present in 7 of 15 baseline cases (46.7%) and in 10 of 15 post-intervention cases (66.7%). Six post-intervention accounts (40.0%) spontaneously incorporated named Odyssey-related characters or places despite the neutral post-test instruction. Case material also showed that change was heterogeneous: some representations became more environmentally or socially situated, whereas others showed stronger narrative organisation or closer visual-verbal integration. Findings are interpreted as preliminary representational patterns, not as evidence of treatment efficacy.

Keywords: theatrical play; educational drama; Odyssey; home; belonging; children's drawings; mild cognitive difficulties; embodied learning; multiple-case study; child voice

1. Introduction

Home is encountered early as a physical place, but its meaning is also constructed through relationships, everyday practices, memory, emotion, security, identity, and belonging. Children's accounts of place therefore cannot be reduced to architectural description alone (Juutinen *et al.*, 2024; Koistinen *et al.*, 2025). Visual methods can make these meanings accessible, particularly when drawing is accompanied by the participant's own explanation rather than interpreted independently by an adult (Allen *et al.*, 2025; Podobnik *et al.*, 2024; Sun *et al.*, 2023).

This caution is especially relevant when drawing tasks resemble historically projective procedures such as House-Tree-Person. Contemporary evidence does not support deterministic psychological conclusions from isolated graphic signs (Lin *et al.*, 2022; Santillo *et al.*, 2025). In the present study, drawings were therefore used as elicitation and contextual material, not as diagnostic tests.

Theatrical play offers a complementary route to meaning-making because it combines movement, gesture, role-taking, imagination, narrative, and social interaction. Drama-based research suggests educational and social-emotional potential, although reported outcomes appear to depend on the characteristics of the participants, the educational context, and the nature and duration of the intervention (Batdı & Elaldı, 2020; Celume *et al.*, 2020; Van Berkel & Bosman, 2023; Robinson & Crane, 2025). Homeric material has also been used in special-education contexts: Edmiston and Sobjack (2017) employed dramatic inquiry around Homeric events with pupils with emotional, behavioural, and learning difficulties, while Gkatzogia (2018) examined Odyssey-based drama-play with students with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities.

A narrower gap remains at the intersection of these areas. Less is known about what happens when a structured mythology-based theatrical experience is linked to repeated opportunities to draw and talk about a personally meaningful concept such as home, while deliberately avoiding projective diagnosis and literary-knowledge testing.

The present pilot multiple-case study addresses this gap by examining visual and verbal representations of home before and after an Odyssey-based theatrical-play programme.

2. Research Questions

RQ1: How do participants represent home visually and verbally before the Odyssey-based theatrical-play intervention?

RQ2: What changes are observed in the house drawings and accompanying oral responses when the same procedure is repeated after the intervention?

RQ3: Is post-intervention enrichment evident in physical/environmental detail, relational-affective meaning, or both?

RQ4: What qualitative observations emerge regarding participants' engagement with drawing, description, recording, and playback?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theatrical Play and Embodied Meaning-Making

Play and theatrical activity allow experience to be reorganised through symbolic action, role, movement, language, and interaction. Playful-learning frameworks emphasise active engagement, agency, social participation, meaningful goals, and exploration (Parker *et al.*, 2022; Skene *et al.*, 2022; Papadimitropoulou *et al.*, 2026a). Vygotsky (1978) located imaginative activity within socially mediated development, while Bruner (1990) emphasised narrative as a way of organising experience. For participants whose expressive strengths vary, theatrical play can provide routes to participation that do not depend exclusively on extended verbal discourse. Recent process-drama research also highlights self-awareness and supportive classroom interaction (Lu, 2025). Drama-rich pedagogy can further create embodied and role-based contexts for learning (Cleeve Gerken *et al.*, 2024).

Embodied perspectives further support the educational relevance of movement and spatial action. Cognition can be shaped by bodily positioning, gesture, perception, and interaction with the environment (Wilson, 2002; Shapiro, 2019; Faella *et al.*, 2025). In the present programme, distance, obstacle, direction, separation, approach, and return were enacted rather than explained only as abstract concepts.

2.2. The Odyssey as an Experiential Narrative Scaffold

The Odyssey was used as a narrative scaffold for theatrical play rather than as a literary text to be analysed. Selected motifs were reorganised into accessible experiential contrasts: home/away, departure/return, direction/disorientation, obstacle/solution, transformation/return to self, distraction/continuing the journey, and separation/reunion. Across the sessions, participants enacted leaving, travelling, becoming lost, confronting obstacles, making choices, remembering a destination, finding a route, and returning.

A key methodological principle was that the practitioner did not define home as family, love, safety, or happiness. Such definitions could have directly shaped later responses. The programme made departure, distance, orientation, memory, and return salient while leaving participants free to construct their own meanings of home.

The educational adaptation of Greek mythology provides a relevant precedent for this use of narrative as an experiential resource. Mythological material has been reshaped for children through storytelling and values-oriented educational approaches (Meliriti, 2021; Styla, 2025), while the Odyssey itself has been adapted for participatory drama and accessible performance (Grove & Park, 1996; Ruby & Kelso, 2024). These works support the pedagogical use of myth as flexible material for participation, imagination, and enactment, rather than as a text requiring literary analysis.

2.3. Home, Relationships, and Belonging

A house is materially visible, whereas home may also be organised through relationships, activities, memory, emotion, acceptance, safety, and belonging. Koistinen *et al.* (2025) identify social relations, safety, and acceptance as central dimensions in children's and young people's meanings of home. Allen *et al.* (2025) likewise show that children's accounts of belonging can include friendship, caring, shared activity, inclusion, safety, and feeling at home. Home may also be remembered, missed, anticipated, or imagined while physically absent. Children's perspectives also indicate relational and spatial pathways to belonging (Villumsen *et al.*, 2025). Multimodal representations can provide an additional route for exploring place, identity, and belonging (Yu *et al.*, 2026).

The framework did not assume that home would be represented positively. Solitude, ambiguity, conflict, landscape, animals, objects, or absence could be equally meaningful when they arose from the participant's own account.

2.4. Children's Drawings and Child Voice

Drawings were treated as participant-produced representations whose interpretation required dialogue. Observable features could be described, but fixed psychological meanings were not assigned to them. The participant's verbal account was considered alongside the image (Podobnik *et al.*, 2024). Visual and verbal evidence could converge or diverge: a participant might mention people who were not drawn, draw figures without discussing them, or accompany a visually simple image with a complex narrative. Both convergence and divergence were retained as findings rather than forcing the two modalities into a single interpretation. Recent methodological work likewise emphasises careful attention to children's own perspectives when researching belonging (Juutinen *et al.*, 2025). Dialogic drawing can support children's participation and voice (Barblett *et al.*, 2024), while drawing combined with storytelling can foreground lived experience (Costa *et al.*, 2025). Creative approaches such as drawing and mapping can also make children's perspectives on spaces and relationships more accessible (Burke *et al.*, 2026).

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study employed an exploratory qualitative multiple-case design with a structured descriptive pre–post comparison. Each participant constituted an individual case. The same house-drawing and oral-elicitation procedure was used before and after the programme. Analysis proceeded from within-case comparison to cross-case synthesis. The three age groups were used descriptively to organise cases across developmental periods and were not treated as statistically comparable cohorts. Because the study was naturalistic, uncontrolled, and small, it was hypothesis-generating and did not estimate a population treatment effect or establish causal efficacy (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018).

3.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 15 participants (8 boys and 7 girls) aged 6–14 years, organised into three age groups of five participants each. The 6–8-year group consisted of three boys and two girls; the 9–11-year group consisted of two boys and three girls; and the 12–14-year group consisted of three boys and two girls. All were already attending a structured creative activity programme; accordingly, convenience sampling was used. Participants were described for the purposes of the study as having mild cognitive difficulties. All had existing formal assessments issued by a Centre for Interdisciplinary Assessment, Counselling and Support (KEDASY). The term “mild cognitive difficulties” is used descriptively rather than as a specific diagnostic category.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) age 6–14 years and membership of one of the three predefined age bands; (b) an existing formal KEDASY assessment documenting educational and/or cognitive support needs; and (c) ability to participate in the drawing, oral-description, and theatrical-play activities. Individuals who did not meet these criteria or could not participate in the full programme were not eligible. Potential participants were identified from the existing programme, and informed consent was obtained from their legal guardians. No eligible participant declined, and no participant withdrew.

Age group	n	Sex distribution	Shared characteristic
6–8 years	5	3 boys, 2 girls	Mild cognitive difficulties
9–11 years	5	2 boys, 3 girls	Mild cognitive difficulties
12–14 years	5	3 boys, 2 girls	Mild cognitive difficulties

3.3. Pre-Intervention Drawing and Oral Elicitation

Before the programme, each participant completed three drawings individually: a house, a tree, and a person. Immediately after each drawing, four open-ended questions were administered, and responses were recorded. House questions were:

- 1) Tell me something about this house;
- 2) Who lives in this house?
- 3) How does someone feel inside this house? and

4) What is there around this house?

The tree questions concerned description, location, what the tree needed to be well, and what surrounded it. The person questions concerned description, activity, feeling, and surroundings.

3.4. Function of the Tree and Person Materials

The tree and person drawings were not repeated outcome measures. They were used only to broaden contextual understanding of how each participant represented people, objects, emotion, and environment at baseline. They were interpreted with the participant's words and were not treated as stand-alone projective or diagnostic tests.

3.5. Intervention: Duration and Structure

The intervention lasted eight weeks, with two sessions per week (16 sessions in total), each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Sessions followed a predictable structure of activation, a main theatrical-play activity, and closure/relaxation.

Sessions	Odyssey-based theme	Core experiential concepts
1–2	Ithaca and Departure	home, departure, separation, journey
3–4	The Sea	uncertainty, direction, disorientation, cooperation
5–6	The Cyclops	obstacle, fear, problem-solving, cooperation
7–8	Circe	transformation, identity, bodily expression
9–10	The Sirens	attraction, choice, self-regulation, direction
11–12	Calypso	absence, memory, longing, choice, desired return
13–14	Finding the Way Back	memory, orientation, anticipation, return
15–16	Ithaca and Homecoming	recognition, reunion, relationship, belonging

3.6. Post-Intervention Procedure

After session 16, the house task was repeated as the principal pre–post comparison. Participants received the same neutral instruction to draw a house and were asked the same four questions. The post-test instruction did not refer to an ideal home, Ithaca, Odysseus, family, love, safety, belonging, or desired relationships.

3.7. Analytic Framework

Analysis was qualitative, descriptive, and case-oriented. Visual material was examined for directly observable structural and environmental elaboration, human presence, differentiation and proximity of persons, shared activity, accessibility or connection to surrounding space, self-positioning, and relational or narrative organisation. Oral material was examined for descriptive elaboration, people and relationships mentioned, shared activities, closeness or care, emotional vocabulary and meaning, self-positioning, safety/acceptance/belonging, and spontaneously introduced environmental or relational meaning. These dimensions formed a study-specific descriptive framework, not a validated psychometric scale.

The analytic unit was the drawing considered together with the participant's own explanation. A distinction was maintained between concepts absent at baseline and appearing after the programme and concepts already verbally available at baseline but becoming visually integrated later. The latter were interpreted as increased externalisation. Coding and interpretation were conducted by the researcher; no independent second coding or formal inter-rater reliability assessment was undertaken, a limitation relevant to transparency and consistency in qualitative case analysis (Cole, 2024). Accordingly, no claims of formal coding reliability, psychometric validity, or measurement precision are made.

3.8. Data Analysis

Within-case analysis compared each participant's pre- and post-intervention house material, while baseline tree and person material was used only as contextual evidence. Four evidence streams were kept distinct: pre-intervention visual material, pre-intervention verbal material, post-intervention visual material, and post-intervention verbal material. Cross-case synthesis then examined recurring and divergent patterns. Cases showing little change, contradictory change, or strong baseline representations were retained.

Simple counts (n) and percentages (%) were used only when a verbal pattern could be identified directly and consistently across all 15 paired house interviews. These summaries were descriptive supports for the qualitative synthesis, not psychometric scores or inferential statistics. Formal VES/NRES scores, effect sizes, and significance tests were not used.

4. Results

The 15 cases did not follow a single trajectory. Drawings could be distinguished in terms of greater or lesser detail, and changes in graphic detail constituted one important dimension of the analysis. However, detail alone did not capture the full range of observed changes, which could also involve environmental, relational, emotional, or narrative elements. Moreover, visual and verbal material did not always change in parallel. The individual case therefore remained the primary unit of analysis, with simple numerical summaries used for clearly identifiable patterns.

4.1. Increased Visual and Verbal Elaboration

The clearest cross-case finding was a tendency toward greater elaboration of home in both the visual and verbal material. Using a conservative descriptive criterion, increased visual elaboration was recorded only when the post-intervention house representation contained clearly observable additional or more differentiated architectural, environmental, human, spatial, or scene-related information compared with the corresponding baseline drawing.

On this basis, 10 of the 15 participants (66.7%) showed clearly increased visual elaboration in their post-intervention representation of home. In these cases, change was expressed through features such as additional architectural detail, a richer surrounding environment, the introduction or clearer presence of human figures, increased use of the pictorial space, or the organisation of previously isolated elements into a more developed scene. For example, some initially sparse house representations subsequently incorporated windows, doors, people, vegetation, pathways, clouds, flowers, or other contextual elements. The important finding was therefore not simply that drawings became larger, but that approximately two-thirds of the sample produced visually richer and more contextualised representations after the programme.

The same overall proportion was observed in the oral material. Ten of the 15 participants (66.7%) also produced more elaborated post-intervention verbal accounts. Greater verbal elaboration was identified when responses contained additional specific information about the house, its surroundings, people and relationships, shared activities, or emotional and narrative context. Post-intervention descriptions therefore tended, in approximately two-thirds of cases, to extend beyond brief object identification toward more differentiated accounts of home as a lived environment.

The parallel descriptive proportions are noteworthy:

Main finding	Participants showing clear increase	Percentage
Visual elaboration of the representation of home	10/15	66.7%
Verbal elaboration of the description of home	10/15	66.7%

Thus, the principal cross-case finding can be expressed succinctly: approximately two-thirds of the participants showed a clear increase in representational elaboration following the programme, both in the visual material and in the richness of the accompanying oral accounts.

The visual changes were not identical across cases. For some participants, elaboration was primarily architectural; for others, it involved environmental elements, human presence, spatial organisation, or the development of a more coherent scene. Similarly, verbal change ranged from the addition of environmental information to richer descriptions of people, relationships, activities, and emotional experience. Visual and verbal change therefore represented complementary rather than interchangeable dimensions of elaboration.

These percentages are descriptive. They indicate the proportion of individual cases in which a clear pre–post increase was observed and do not represent a 66.7% improvement in ability, a statistically significant treatment effect, or evidence that the theatrical-play programme independently caused the observed changes.

No consistent age-related pattern was observed across the three descriptive age groups (6–8, 9–11, and 12–14 years). Increased visual and verbal elaboration occurred across age groups, while the magnitude and form of change varied more clearly between individual cases than between age categories.

4.2. From Isolated Objects to Situated Scenes

Across the available visual case material, a recurring qualitative pattern was movement from an object-centred representation of a house toward a more situated representation of home. Post-intervention drawings could include vegetation, pathways or surrounding forms, human figures, or a more integrated relationship between the building and its environment. These features were described rather than assigned fixed psychological meanings.

4.3. Relational and Narrative Elaboration: Case 14

Case 14 provides a clear example of relational and narrative change. At baseline, the participant described the house as “a lonely house” and identified himself as its inhabitant; the baseline person was described as sad because “he is alone.” In the post-intervention account, the participant explained that Odysseus was returning home and that, upon his return, he found Penelope there. This verbal explanation is particularly relevant because the figure represented has a female form; its identification as Penelope therefore follows the participant’s own account rather than an interpretation based solely on graphic features. The narrative also expanded to include his son and the suitors. The change is therefore best described as a shift toward a relationally and narratively organised representation of return and interpersonal connection, not as evidence that the participant’s emotional state changed.

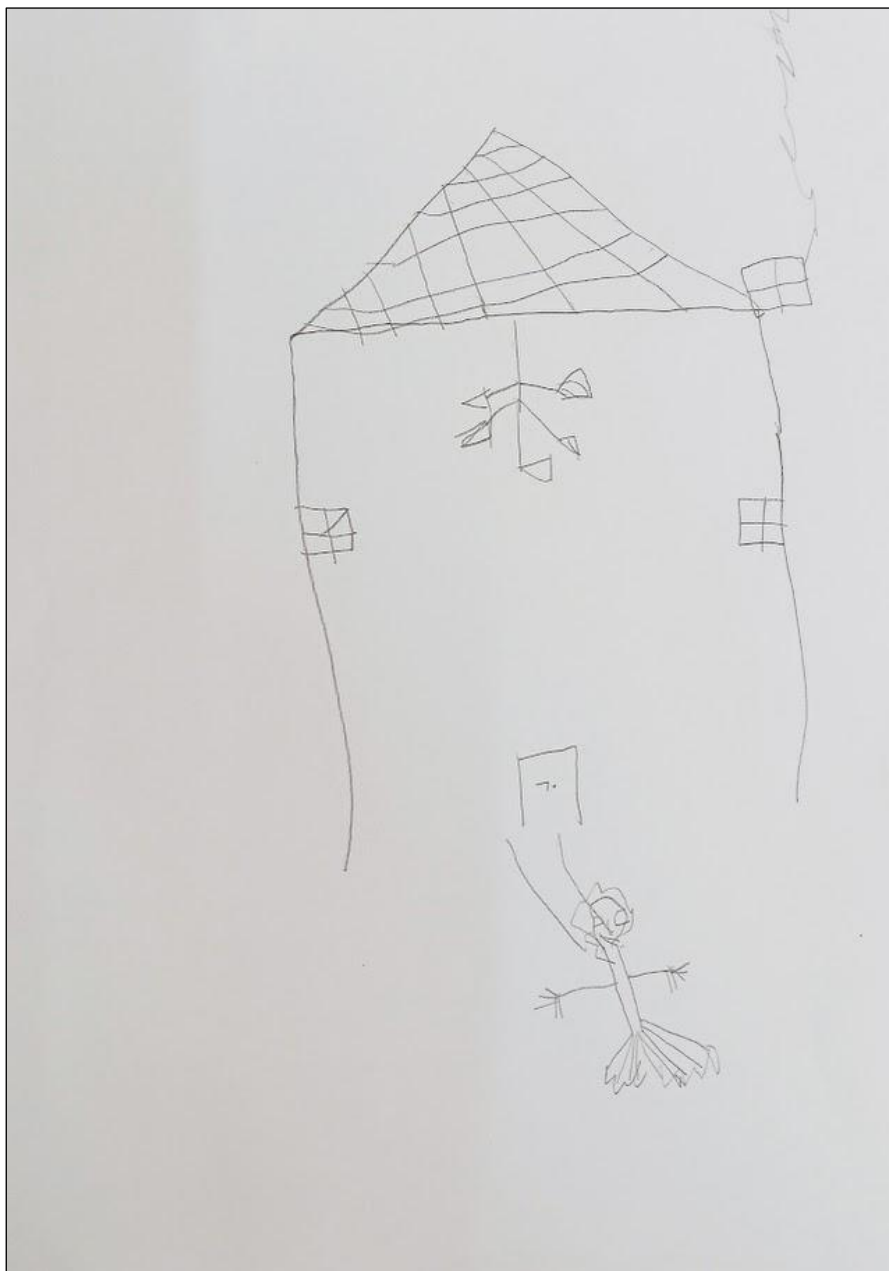


Figure 1: Illustrative post-intervention house drawing used in within-case interpretation

4.4. Visual–Verbal Convergence: Case 15

Case 15 illustrates the importance of interpreting visual and verbal evidence together. At baseline, the drawings were predominantly object-centred, although the interview already contained relational and environmental references: the participant identified herself as the inhabitant of the house, described a garden, referred to a person she cared about, and expressed affection. Post-intervention, however, relationships of affection, love, and togetherness became more prominent in both the drawing and the participant's verbal account. The house was represented as part of a more integrated scene that included a human figure and multiple plant- and tree-like elements. Verbally, the participant shifted from an individual reference ("I") to collective and family-oriented expressions such as "with my family" and "we are having a good time," while also

referring to a garden, trees, and flowers. Thus, the post-intervention representation placed greater emphasis on affectionate relationships, family togetherness, and a shared sense of home across both visual and verbal modes. This is best interpreted as increased visual integration, environmental and relational elaboration, and stronger visual-verbal convergence, rather than as the emergence of relational concepts that had been entirely absent at baseline.

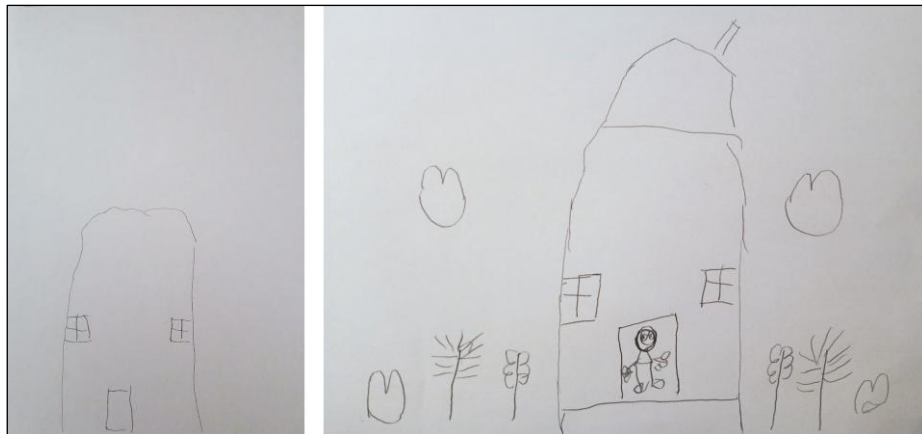


Figure 2: Illustrative pre-post house drawings showing increased environmental and social integration

4.5. Individual Variation and Child Voice

The cross-case material also contained divergence between modalities and strong baseline representations. A participant could provide a richer oral narrative while the drawing remained visually simple. Selected verbal accounts likewise showed that participants sometimes used the house task to express solitude, family connection, absence, return, fear, calm, or shared activity. The participant's own words therefore remained central to interpretation.

4.6. Engagement with the Procedure

Field observations indicated positive engagement with the Odyssey activities and with drawing, describing pictures, recording, and listening to recorded voices. All participants asked to listen to their recorded voice again, while some spontaneously expressed a wish to repeat the activity because they appeared to experience it as enjoyable and play-like. This expressed wish did not result in additional repetitions of the research procedure beyond those specified in the study protocol. Thus, it is reported as an indication of participants' engagement rather than as repeated or differential exposure to the procedure. More broadly, the combination of drawing, talking, recording, and listening back appeared to provide an engaging and playful context for interaction. These observations were not collected with a formal satisfaction measure and are therefore reported as qualitative process observations rather than measured outcomes.

5. Discussion

The main finding is not that participants simply drew “better” or more detailed houses after the programme. The case material points instead to several possible forms of representational change: environmental situating, social population of the scene, explicit relationships, narrative organisation, and stronger convergence between what participants said and what they drew. This distinction is consistent with contemporary accounts of home as a relational as well as material phenomenon (Allen *et al.*, 2025; Koistinen *et al.*, 2025).

The descriptive verbal counts add a limited quantitative layer without changing the qualitative character of the study. Explicit named relationships were present in 46.7% of baseline house accounts and 66.7% of post-intervention accounts. The difference is informative as a sample description, but the small uncontrolled design, researcher coding, and heterogeneous baseline profiles prevent causal or inferential interpretation. Likewise, the spontaneous appearance of named Odyssey-related material in 40.0% of post accounts indicates narrative carryover from the programme rather than proof of a generalised psychological effect.

The Odyssey may have been useful because it provided a coherent embodied sequence of departure, uncertainty, obstacle, choice, memory, orientation, and return without explicitly telling participants what home should mean. Embodied-learning perspectives suggest that bodily action and spatial experience can contribute to meaning construction (Wilson, 2002; Shapiro, 2019; Faella *et al.*, 2025), while theatrical play adds role, social interaction, and perspective-taking. The present findings are compatible with that educational rationale but do not isolate the intervention from maturation, repeated drawing, other educational experiences, or thematic priming.

5.1. Child Voice and Pedagogical Enrichment

Drawing followed by open-ended description gave participants an opportunity to author the meaning of their images. Methodologically, this reduces the risk of adult projection onto drawings; pedagogically, it can reveal relationships, preferences, memories, emotions, and environmental meanings that may not be visible in the picture alone. The value of the procedure therefore lies partly in creating a multimodal communicative space in which the participant draws, speaks, listens, and is listened to. Beyond its role in data collection, this kind of procedure may offer educators an opportunity to engage with children in a different, playful way and to become better acquainted with their individual interests, meanings, and modes of expression. This is compatible with related movement-and-story work in residential social care (Papadimitropoulou *et al.*, 2026b). Recent work on children’s experiential drawing similarly stresses attentive engagement with the meanings children attach to their visual productions (Lan *et al.*, 2025).

5.2. Implications for Special and Inclusive Education

For special and inclusive education, the approach is most defensible as an enrichment of opportunities for expression rather than as a diagnostic technique. Theatrical play can provide embodied narrative experiences, drawing can externalise selected aspects of meaning, and conversation can clarify what the participant intended. Used together, these modalities may support participation for learners whose visual, verbal, and embodied expressive strengths differ. Related work by Sarris and colleagues also supports attention to play, drama, psychomotor functioning, and social competence in educational contexts (Sarris, 2025; Sarris *et al.*, 2024; Sarris & Papadimitropoulou, 2014). In practice, special educators could use brief cycles of theatrical enactment, drawing, and open-ended discussion as complementary opportunities for learners to express meanings across different modalities. Such activities are best used for pedagogical exploration and communication, with participants' own explanations guiding interpretation rather than treating graphic features as diagnostic indicators.

6. Limitations

Several limitations constrain interpretation. First, the sample was small ($n = 15$; five participants per age group), so age-group organisation provides developmental context rather than generalisable comparison. Second, there was no control or comparison condition; repeated drawing, maturation, familiarity with the practitioner, other educational experiences, and the salience of homecoming could contribute to observed differences. Third, the practitioner-researcher's familiarity with participants may have supported communication while also increasing expectancy, confirmation bias and social-desirability risks. Fourth, the study-specific descriptive categories were coded by one researcher and no independent inter-rater assessment was completed. For this reason, formal reliability, precision, VES/NRES, and inferential claims were not made. Fifth, historically, projective drawing procedures have recognised psychometric limitations; the present design reduced this concern by avoiding diagnostic interpretation and by using tree and person material only contextually (Lin *et al.*, 2022; Santillo *et al.*, 2025). Sixth, the post-intervention narrative could be influenced by thematic priming because departure and homecoming were repeatedly enacted, even though the post-test instruction was neutral. Finally, there was no delayed follow-up, so persistence of the observed patterns cannot be assessed.

7. Conclusion

This pilot multiple-case study explored how 15 participants represented home before and after an Odyssey-based theatrical-play programme. The findings suggest that representational change is multidimensional: it may involve environmental elaboration, human presence, explicit relationships, narrative organisation, or closer integration between verbal and visual material. Descriptively, explicit named family or interpersonal

relationships appeared in 7 of 15 baseline house accounts (46.7%) and 10 of 15 post-intervention accounts (66.7%), while 6 of 15 post accounts (40.0%) spontaneously incorporated named Odyssey-related material. These figures describe this sample only and do not establish efficacy.

The broader educational contribution lies in the combination of theatrical play, drawing, conversation, and recorded child voice. The procedure created opportunities for participants to construct and explain meanings rather than having meaning imposed on their drawings. Future research should retain this child-centred multimodal approach while adding larger samples, comparison conditions, independent coding, systematic engagement measures, and longitudinal follow-up.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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