Peer-reviewed paper

**Te Ira Atua: The spiritual spark of the child**

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“E ai ki tā te Māori he atua tonu kei roto i te mokopuna ina whānau mai ana ia ki tēnei ao” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 35). This quote is from the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s early childhood curriculum policy statement, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Matauranga mo ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996). It speaks of the godliness or spiritual essence each child inherits from their ancestors when they are born (Early Childhood Development, 1999; Reedy, 2003). From a traditional Māori perspective, not only is the child endowed with spiritual potential or a divine spirit, but the world the child is born into is also endowed with spiritual influences.

**Introduction**

*Te Whāriki* translates as a woven mat that allows for diverse patterning depending on knowledge bases, beliefs, and values, which all may stand upon. *Te Whāriki* is a bicultural document, an example of how traditional Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of British descent) values, concepts, worldviews, and philosophies have been integrated into a modern, bicultural, educational document. Understandings of Māori ways of knowing the world and the child are integral to the curriculum document and important for the wellbeing of the Māori child. *Te Whāriki* highlights the need to weave the cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the child in a holistic and meaningful manner. It states, “the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of growth are all important to enable children to develop confidence in themselves and their abilities” (MoE, 1996, p. 94). Furthermore, the document emphasises that learning and development will be integrated through:

- recognition of the spiritual dimension of children’s lives in culturally, socially and individually appropriate ways; and

- recognition of the significance and contribution of previous generations to the child’s concept of self (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 41).

Despite these statements, there is little to indicate that the spiritual dimensions of the child, or the world, are acknowledged and reflected in early childhood education practice (Bone, 2007). Bone’s research found that the whole topic of spirituality within New Zealand early childhood practice tended to be unarticulated, unless the service had a particular philosophy that acknowledged spirituality (Bone 2007). This inattention to the spiritual is due, I believe, to the nature of modern Western society, which is essentially secular, leaving little room for ideas and beliefs of the sacred or spiritual. Western science has effectively disconnected spirituality from other aspects of individual and
institutional existence, and has embedded belief systems that position reason, truth and logic over faith and spirituality. As spirituality cannot be proven scientifically, it is often viewed as illogical and unsophisticated and therefore has no place in educational theory and practice (Bone, 2007; Lyotard, 1996). Ife (1995) makes the point that the absence of the spiritual denies an important facet of human existence.

This paper explores the spiritual dimensions of traditional Māori ways of knowing the world and the child. It makes connections to traditional Māori perceptions of the creation of the world, the connectedness of the person to the creation of the world (whakapapa), the conceptualisation of the world (wairuatanga) and their importance to the wellbeing and holistic dimensions of the child. It then discusses Māori ways of knowing the child, the spiritual nature of the child and the traits each child inherits, including tapu, mana, mauri and wairua. It emphasises the importance of these traits to the wellbeing and development of the child, acknowledging the interconnectedness of the physical and the spiritual, and the connection to previous generations. Finally it discusses implications for the children’s wellbeing within early childhood education.

**Māori ways of knowing the world**

Traditional Māori ways of knowing the world and the genealogy of creation begin with Io taketake (the originator) and evolve through different spheres of development until the present day. The following is an example of these spheres.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I te tīmatanga, kō te kore</td>
<td>In the beginning there was a void</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kō te pō</td>
<td>Within the void was the night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nā te pō</td>
<td>From within the night, seeds were cultivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka puta kō te kukune</td>
<td>It was here that movement began – the stretching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kō te pupuke</td>
<td>There the shoots enlarged and swelled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kō te hihiri</td>
<td>Then there was pure energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kō te mahara</td>
<td>Then there was the subconscious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kō te manako</td>
<td>Then the desire to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka puta i te whei ao</td>
<td>Movement from darkness to light, from conception to birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ki te ao mārama</td>
<td>From the learning comes knowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tihei Mauriora</td>
<td>I sneeze and there is life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 4)

Ranginui (the sky father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother), are next in line, followed by their children. There are variations in the accounts of the numbers of children born to Ranginui and Papatūānuku; however, it is generally accepted that there were at least six main atua, guardians or gods, who received authority over certain domains of life. They include Tūmatauenga (guardian of war), Tangaroa (guardian of the oceans), Tawhirimatea (guardian of the weather), Rongomātāne and Haumia tiketike (guardians of food), and Tane (guardian of the forests). Māori trace their genealogy or whakapapa back to Tāne, to the world of the gods and to the creation of the universe (Barlow, 1996; Reilly, 2004; Te Rito, 2007).
Whakapapa (genealogy)

Whakapapa informs these genealogical relationships and provides the foundation for inherent connectedness and interdependence to all things (Cheung, 2008). From a Māori perspective, people are not superior but related through whakapapa to all aspects of the environment, themselves imbued with spiritual elements. According to Barlow (1991), whakapapa is the genealogy of all living things from the gods to the present day. It is the basis for organising knowledge related to the creation and development of all things. Spiritual connectedness and spirituality have always been inextricably linked to whakapapa (Broughton, 1993; Ihimaera, 2004; Moeke-Pikering, 1996; Tse, Lloyd, Petchkovsky & Manaia, 2005). All aspects within a Māori worldview are viewed as having spiritual origins and direct links to the gods (Berryman, 2008). Māori can trace genealogy back to Papatūānuku (the earth mother); therefore, they not only live on the land but are part of the land (Ministry of Justice, 2001). Wolfgramm and Waetford (2009) state, “the dynamic and intimate interrelationships between the spiritual, social and natural worlds and the indeterminacy of evolutionary processes in a Māori worldview are captured through creation stories which include layers of symbolism and metaphor” (p. 5). Whakapapa identifies who one is, where one is from and thus identifies the place one belongs (Graham, 2009). It connects Māori to the land providing a sense of unity and harmony with the environment. It has been viewed as verification of the continued existence of Māori not only as a people, but also as tangata whenua (people of the land) in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It affirms kin ties to iwi, hapū, and whānau (tribe, sub-tribe and extended family) and to tūrangawaewae (tribal lands). It reifies connections to past generations and those generations to come, and asserts that Māori will continue to exist as long as the land continues to exist (Ministry of Justice, 2001; Williams, 2004).

It is to do with that sense of being essentially at one with nature and our environment, rather than at odds with it. As tangata whenua we are people of the land – who have grown out of the land, Papatūānuku, our Earth Mother. Having knowledge of whakapapa helps ground us to the earth. We have a sense of belonging here, a sense of purpose, a raison d’être, which extends beyond the sense of merely existing on this planet. (Te Rito, 2007, p. 4)

Wairuatanga (spirituality)

A Māori perspective of the world maintains that all things have a physical as well as a spiritual body, including the earth, birds and animals. It is an expression of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual and the wholeness of life. In its broadest sense, wairuatanga refers to the spiritual dimension, which is internalised in each person from conception (Metge, 1976). The concept of wairuatanga is derived from Māori cosmology. The term literally means two waters, the spiritual and the physical. Love (2004) describes wairuatanga as two streams merging as a river, with a current, eddies and ebbs. Wairuatanga recognises that all aspects of the Māori world have an ever-present spiritual dimension, which pervades all Māori values. The spiritual and the secular are not closed or separate from each other but are intimately connected with activities in the everyday material world coming under the influence and interpenetrated by spiritual powers from the higher world, the spiritual world (Marsden, 2003; Ministry of Justice, 2001; Reilly, 2004; Shirres, 1997). In this
way people are inherently connected with the universe, with the world of spiritual powers, the world of the gods.

It also means that those that have passed on, whilst existing within the spiritual realm, still remain in the physical, alongside the living as well as within the living. Ancestors who have passed on live with their descendants in the everyday world, and this is recognised in the way Māori conduct their lives (Ministry of Justice, 2001). “[T]he spirits of the dead or living are accepted as real phenomena whereas life is seen as a transitory process moving from body-to-body and generation-to-generation. Time has no boundaries; it is both past and present” (Tse, Lloyd, Petchkovsky & Manaia, 2005, p. 183). The past, present and future are viewed as intertwined, and life is seen as a continuous cosmic process. Within this frame the spiritual is integrated into the secular, and spiritual matters are dealt with in the course of everyday matters (Butterworth, n.d.; Ministry of Justice, 2001; Patterson, 1992). Cody (2004) claims that spirituality from a Māori perspective includes the practice and belief that acknowledge the spirit or wairua of all things Māori. It pervades all aspects of Māori culture and is recognised as a critical factor in Māori views of self.

Spiritual beliefs are a central feature of a person’s overall wellbeing and identity. Patterson (1992) argues that from a western perspective the past is behind and one’s goals and aspirations relate to the future, which is ahead. From a Māori perspective, the opposite is the case and the past is ahead, not behind. It is therefore in the past that one finds one’s models, inspiration and guides. This conceptualisation of history, time, of the continuous cosmic movement does not leave the past behind; rather, one carries one’s past into the future. The past therefore is central to and shapes both present and future identity. The strength of carrying one’s past into the future is that ancestors are ever present and one’s place in the kin group is acknowledged and affirmed (Patterson, 1992).

Māori ways of knowing the child

*Whakapapa* connects the Māori child through their parents to generations of ancestors, and to the spirit world of the gods. The spirits of people come from the *Rangi Tūhāhā*, the twelve dimensions of enlightenment in the company of the gods. This is where the spirits exist until they are required for the physical life of the person and where the spirit returns to after physical death (Barlow, 1991). The physical and spiritual potential of the person are joined at conception becoming an individual entity, endowed with spiritual qualities. From ancestors the child inherits spiritual traits fundamental to their wellbeing, spiritual, psychological, and social (Mead, 2003). These spiritual traits include but are not limited to: *tapu, mana mauri*, and *wairua*.

**Tapu**

Mead (2003) translates *tapu* as “being with potentiality for power” (p. 32). According to Mead, personal *tapu* is the person’s most important spiritual attribute. It is pervasive, influencing all other attributes, and is akin to a personal force field that can be felt and sensed by others. It is the sacred life force that reflects the state of the whole person. Elsdon Best (1922) linked *tapu* with the notion of spiritual and intellectual potential, when he claimed:
Man is of supernatural descent, from the personified forms of natural phenomena, the soul coming originally from Io (the first of the gods); hence man has a modicum of ira atua (supernatural life); this divine spark (mauriora) is very tapu, it represents man's true vitality, his physical, mental, moral and spiritual welfare; the spark must be protected from pollution. (Best, 1922, cited in Patterson, 1992, p. 84)

**Mana**

Whereas tapu is the potentiality for power, mana is the actual power, the realisation of the tapu of the person. Mana at a basic level can be translated as “authority, control, influence, prestige, power, psychic force, effectual, binding, authoritative . . . and take effect” (Hemara, 2000, p. 68). It also has a deeper meaning of ‘spiritual power and authority’ (Love, 2004). Mana is a crucial aspect of Māori perceptions of the world and of the self, with almost all activities linked to upholding and enhancing mana. Understandings of mana are therefore critical to an understanding of the Māori person or child, and the Māori world (Shirres, 1997).

All children are born with an increment of mana from their parents and ancestors (Hemara, 2000; Marsden, 1992; Mead, 2003; 2003; Metge, 1995; Shirres 1997). Mana is accrued and actioned through one’s service to whānau and the wider community, including hapū and iwi (Keelan, 2006). Shirres (1997) explains that mana is the power of being, a being that is realised over time. Paul-Burke (2011) adds that “Mana is derived from the spiritual dimension and humans are merely the vessels through which mana flows and manifests itself” (p.14). Mana can only be present if the vessel in which it resides has mauri or life-force or life-energy. Mauri is a requirement for life itself. As Satterfield, Roberts, Henare, Finucane, & Henare (2005) explain, “Our belief is that there’s wairua and tinana . . . wairua is the spiritual part of the person and tinana is the physical side. Now you need something to join them together . . . it’s the mauri” (p.28).

**Mauri**

Mauri is inherently related with other metaphysical characteristics, including tapu, mana and wairua. Mauri is a generic life force. All living things have a mauri and all things are connected. Mauri is the spark of life, the active element that indicates one is alive (Barlow, 1991; Mead, 2003). It is an essential and inseparable aspect of the child. It is an active sign of life, an attribute of self. The Māori child is born with mauri, which remains with them all their lives. When the child is physically and socially healthy, the mauri is in a state of balance, known as Mauri tau (the mauri is at peace). It is therefore important to nurture and protect the mauri of the child (Mead, 2003).

The mauri is the life force that is bound to an individual and represents the active force of life which enables the heart to beat, the blood to flow, food to be eaten and digested, energy to be expended, the limbs to move, the mind to think and have some control over the body systems, and the personality of the person to be vibrant, expressive and impressive. (Mead, 2003, p. 53)
Wairua

Whereas *mauri* is bound to the person and ceases to exist when the person dies, *wairua* can leave the body and lives on after the person dies. The immortality of *wairua* means that these spirits of departed humans live on forever and can be summoned to assist their living descendants. *Wairua* has been compared to the shadow of a person that interacts with the spiritual world and warns of possible danger (Love, 2004). *Wairua* is an unseen energy that impacts upon all aspects of a person’s being and is according to Durie (1985) an essential dimension of Māori health. All children are born with *wairua* which can be translated as ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ (Mead, 2003, p. 54). There are four characteristics of *wairua*:

- it is part of the whole person;
- it is immortal;
- it has the power to warn of danger through dreams and visions; and
- it is subject to attack and damage (Best, 1941).

Foster (2009, p. 32) argues that *wairua* is crucial to children’s learning as it connects to the “unique capacity of the child to think rationally, creatively and intuitively”. Key to understandings of *wairua* is the acknowledgment that *wairua* is subject to damage through illness, injury and the actions and deeds of others. The child’s *wairua* must be acknowledged and protected in order for the child to develop to their full potential. Furthermore, we must be aware of maintaining spiritual balance. As previously stated, *wairua* denotes two waters. Balance or harmony must be maintained between these two waters. Pere (1991) explained that from a Māori perspective everything has a *wairua*. She gave the example of water, which gives but also takes life. The important thing to keep in mind is maintaining balance. Maintaining balance or harmony is a key feature of traditional Māori understandings and practices: balance between the sacred and the secular; life and death; sacred and profane. Actions were not viewed as good or bad, rather they were perceived in terms of harmony and balance. The Māori view of the world is one where balance is maintained across different forces.

Ensuring spiritual harmony or balance is a critical aspect of the child’s holistic wellbeing and development. An imbalance or disharmony in the natural forces can impact upon the holistic wellbeing and development of the child. In order for balance to be maintained, the physical and spiritual dimensions of the child and the child’s world must be acknowledged and reconciled. This, according to Mead (2003), places particular responsibilities on parents, and early childhood services, and teachers, to nurture the spiritual aspects of the child. In order for children to realise their potential and blossom into their worlds their spiritual traits must firstly be recognised, acknowledged and enhanced. Failure to do this can lead to children not reaching their potential and, worse, being spiritually damaged. Early childhood teachers must therefore ensure this does not happen. Attending to the spiritual as well as the physical needs of the child is required to create balance and harmony to the child and the child’s world (Ullrich, 1994).
Spirituality and early childhood education

As mentioned previously, spirituality is an important aspect of the curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*, but lacks articulation in early childhood practice, except in services that emphasise spirituality as an important feature of the service’s philosophy. Steiner and Montessori early childhood services are examples of these types of services in mainstream early childhood. Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori were educational theorists who believed in nurturing children’s bodies and souls. Both wrote about the need to understand and support the spiritual in order for the child to reach their potential. Maria Montessori (1870-1952), an Italian medical doctor, established a preschool for children called the Casa de Bambini or children’s house. This supported the development of her theories through an early childhood curriculum, a range of equipment and a training programme (May, 2013). Montessori referred to the child in terms of being a ‘spiritual embryo’ that could grow and develop through education (Bone 2007). Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian philosopher, developed a programme for a spiritual reformation of life. He acknowledged the inner spiritual world within the person and the spiritual within every aspect of human endeavour (Ullrich, 1994). Although spirituality is an important feature of both Steiner and Montessori early childhood services in New Zealand, this is not the norm for the majority of early childhood services despite the strong emphasis placed on spirituality in *Te Whāriki*.

Māori ways of knowing the world and the child are inherent within the *Te Whāriki* document, stressing the need to recognise the child’s spiritual attributes and the importance of these attributes to the child’s holistic wellbeing. *Te Whāriki* is founded on the aspiration that children “grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). It has four guiding principles to support and guide practice in order to contribute to the holistic wellbeing of the child. These principles include: *Whakamana* (empowerment), *Ngā Hononga* (relationships), *Whānau Tangata* (family and community) and *Kotahitanga* (holistic development). Considering these guiding principles, *Mana* can be translated to mean prestige or power and whaka to enable or make happen. *Whakamana* in the context of education relates to the process of empowering the child to learn and grow, and to develop understandings of their worlds, including the spiritual world. *Te Ngā Hononga* is about the way children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things. *Hono* can be translated as splice, continual, or join (Hemara, 2000). This principle emphasises the connectedness of the child to their worlds. *Whānau tangata* incorporates the wider world of the family and community. *Whānau* can be translated as to be born or family group and *tangata* as person. This principle stresses the concept that individuals are never alone if they continually strengthen and maintain their family and community connections (Hemara, 2000), and the importance of the child being viewed as embedded within their *whānau* and important link to the past and the future. Finally, *Kotahitanga* relates to reflecting the holistic way in which children learn and grow. *Kotahi* translates as one or together with and *kotahitanga* means oneness, singleness, and togetherness (Hemara, 2000). This principle recognises the importance of recognising holistic aspects in the growth and development of children. *Te Whāriki* states, “Adults should recognize the importance of spirituality in the development of the whole child”, particularly for Māori and Tangata Pasefika.
families” (Ministry of E 1996, p. 47). Te Whāriki, therefore, is not only an important document in highlighting the importance of nurturing the spiritual as well as the physical needs of the child, and creating balance and harmony in the child and the child’s world, but is also a valuable resource in supporting early childhood teachers to develop deeper understandings of the spiritual child, and world.

Another early childhood resource document is Te Whatu Pōkeka: Kaupapa Māori Learning and Assessment Exemplars. Launched in 2009, its primary aim was to support quality teaching and learning experiences in Māori early childhood settings, as defined by Māori. It is, however, available to all early childhood services in New Zealand, in order to support the development of bicultural understandings and practices. Te Whatu Pōkeka draws upon Kaupapa Māori theory, and traditional Māori worldviews, values and concepts in order to articulate assessment understandings and framings that express Māori ways of knowing, being and valued learnings. Te Whatu Pōkeka acknowledges that the child is the receptacle of all those who have gone before them, a product of their past, a living connection to ancestors, the gods and the universe. In Te Whatu Pōkeka the child is viewed as being born with three ira (essences) which are linked to whakapapa. The first essence is te Ira Tangata or the essence of or links to both sets of parents. The second is te Ira Wairua or the essence of and links to ancestors. The third is Ira Atua or the essence of and links to the gods (Ministry of Education, 2009). Te Whatu Pōkeka highlights the importance of recognising the child as he kuru pounamu, a treasured gift from the ancestors. It states:

Each child is an individual with individual personality traits inherited from their ancestor. The child is surrounded by those that have passed on and by whānau that guides them on a day-to-day basis. From these guardians, they have developed their own unique ways of being and enhancing the world...These personal traits enhance a child's rangatiratanga or distinctive strengths. (p. 7)

Conclusion

The early childhood curriculum document Te Whāriki recognises the importance of spirituality to the overall wellbeing of the child. Despite this, integrating the spiritual into early childhood practice can be challenging for many early childhood teachers. According to Bone (2007), this is due to the fact that spirituality is viewed as “a challenge to Western scientific thinking and an ethos of rationality and reason” (p. 246) which provides the foundations of secular education in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This, however, does not mean spirituality can be overlooked or side stepped. Within early childhood education ignoring or not acknowledging spirituality is not an option. Spirituality is embedded within Te Whāriki, the early childhood curriculum document, so must be valued and reflected in practice if teachers are to meet their curriculum and pedagogical obligations. More importantly, if recognition is not given to the importance of the spiritual aspect of the child and the world in which they reside, teachers negate a critical dimension of the child’s wellbeing and future development.
References


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