Practitioner Researcher

Spirituality in the early childhood education in New Zealand and around the globe: Relevance, research and beyond

Guneet Sachdev
Graduate Diploma, New Zealand Tertiary College

This article notes that, while research keenly highlights how spirituality plays a critical role in children's lives, it largely goes unrecognised in the importance of child development (Hart, 2005; McCreery, 1994; Whitehead, 2009; Wilson, 2010). Spirituality is a concept that resists definition: it means different things to different people (Hyde, 2008). The term covers a broad spectrum, ranging from sensing a 'divine presence' at one end to the other end where the focus lies on experiencing the emotionally enriching, awe and wonder response to an event, experience or encounter. This abstract and diverse understanding of the term make it difficult to incorporate spiritual development into practical teaching strategies with clear, educational outcomes. This article intends to throws light on what spirituality might mean in the context of early childhood education.

Introduction

This paper examines the discourse on the topic of spirituality in Early Childhood Education (ECE). The New Zealand ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki,* expresses the founding aspiration for children "to grow up as confident, competent 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 the society" (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 9). Such recognition of the importance of spirituality is also evident later in the document with statements such as adults should recognise "the important place of spirituality in the development of the whole child" (p. 41), and how the children's working theories "are infused with the spiritual dimension" (p. 44). In essence, spirituality is awarded such significance that it is underlined in the way it aligns with 'working theories' and considered as one of the central aims of *Te Whāriki*.

Hyde's (2008) book *Children and Spirituality* states that, apart from early childhood professionals, spirituality in the ECE context also interests teachers, psychologists, counsellors, youth workers, and parents, world-wide. Having said that, a review of the literature indicates the near absence or lack of acknowledgement of children's spiritual formation and wellbeing in research on both developmental areas (Cheryl, 2012; Hart, 2005; Ruddock & Cameron, 2010; Wilson, 2010), as well as within professional practice (Bone, 2007; Bone, Cullen & Loveridge, 2007; NAEYC, 2011; Whitehead, 2009).

This article explores common motivating factors for acknowledging a spiritual perspective in ECE; analyses ways in which adults, particularly teachers, might recognise and foster the spiritual dimension in children's learning and development; and examines its common potential benefits for children.

Motivating factors for a spiritual perspective in ECE

For inclusion of spirituality in the early childhood curriculum, it is crucial to acknowledge different motivations based on a range of world-views.

New Zealand researchers, like Whitehead (2009) and Bone (2007), assert that local ECE practitioners are professionally obligated to contribute to spiritual growth of children in order to honour the curriculum as well as the Treaty of Waitangi. Bone (2007) stresses the importance of nurturing children's spiritual wellbeing on an everyday basis to help build their resilience. This is important in the face of New Zealand's current poor social climate, with its highest ranking in youth suicide rates and third highest in child abuse among all OECD countries. Whitehead (2009) affirms that fostering spirituality can help restore rising imbalance within people's lives, and in their relationship with nature, caused by issues, like violence, famines, global warming, poor mental health and a materialistic orientation (Hyde, 2008; Cheryl, 2012). Ruddock and Cameron (2010), undertook research following OFSTED's (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) mandate on fostering self-awareness and non-material aspects of spiritual learning to reduce the stressed student population of the United Kingdom. In fact, "Soka Education", a book based on a Japanese educational theory - Soka (value-creating) education, underlines the destructive effects of education that is solely focussed on fierce academic competitiveness, insulated from human concerns of the 21st century (Ikeda, 2010). Furthermore, Pasifika world-views regard spirituality as an integral part of children's learning and overall growth (Toso, 2011).

Taking another cultural perspective, according to the Māori world-view, the importance of recognising, believing in and nurturing *wairuatanga*, the spiritual existence unique to each life, warrants the attention of practitioners within ECE (Williams & Broadley, 2012). Within the New Zealand curriculum (MoE, 1999) the spiritual dimension stands tall as one of the four pillars of a *whare* (house), a popular model used to represent wellbeing. However, Bone (2005) observes differences in Māori interpretations of the *mana atua* strand of *Te Whāriki* – loosely translated in the document as 'Well-Being'. In contrast Tilly Reedy (a Māori writer of the document) defines it as "a divine spirit, a spark of godliness, in each child born into this world" (p. 308).

Beyond cultural considerations, other researchers show how innate inquisitiveness of young children make spirituality vital to their development (Wilson, 2010; Hart, 2005). They aptly consider children as "natural philosophers", capable of questioning their own identity in the world, reasoning through problems, and being ready to grapple with questions that are not merely philosophical but intrigue their spirit, like, "What makes something living? Am I more alive than a tree? What is the right way to live with plants, animals, and other people?" (Wilson, 2010, p. 26).

In spite of compelling evidence underlined in the literature, Wilson (2010), as well as Ruddock and Cameron (2010), state that misplaced views around spirituality are common deterrents to the importance of spiritual development in childhood. These views range from association with religion, to communication with a divine side of our lives, to children's limited capacities to understand the abstract complex language of spirituality, and to viewing it as inconsequential to children's holistic development. However, Bone (2005) considers a spiritual perspective in

ECE as a validation of its importance in children's lives, and he believes it can all be woven together in the 'Whāriki' or the 'woven mat' to bring alive the spiritual dimension in children's learning and development.

Acknowledging and fostering the spiritual aspect in children's learning

While the discourse on spirituality offers different ways to recognise and nurture children's spiritual dimension, according to Wolf (2000), spiritual nurturing originates from the beliefs and values personally upheld by adults, which children merely reflect back "as mirrors of the society" (Ikeda, 2010, p. 81). These principles must "flow freely from the teacher's own essence" (Wolf, 2000, p. 35) by reflecting on their spiritual nature (Whitehead, 2009), and/or by reminiscing about their spiritual childhood memories (Harris, 2007). Awakening to the criticality of developing their own spirit and wellbeing, would empower adults to act as children's spiritual companions (Bone, 2007; Bone, 2008a; Zhang, 2012). Such spiritual camaraderie would be achieved when adults reduce their pace to help nourish a child's spirit in today's otherwise fast paced world (Harris, 2013). It can also develop when adults provide children with opportunities to engage in meaningful experiences (Harris, 2013; Zhang, 2012).

Apart from this indisputable role that adults play to co-construct spirituality with children, an interesting tension can be identified between fostering spirituality through the daily curriculum in early childhood settings or through intentional interactions with nature. On one end of the spectrum, research encourages adults to provide opportunities of interactions with nature and natural materials (McHenry & Buerk, 2008) in helping to build children's wonderment at the workings of the universe and interacting with the world (Wilson, 2010). In fact, Maria Montessori articulated the importance of familiarising children with the "whole, of reality, the universe, the cosmos" (p. 37) in what she has termed as, '*Cosmic Education'*. Wolf (2001) further urges parents to foster simple activities, like star gazing, sharing pictures of or discussing all that the universe encompasses, in order to help children transcend selfish and man-made boundaries of race, culture and religions that withhold spiritual development (Wolf, 2001).

In a qualitative empirical study, Bone (2007) argues against spirituality restricted to something in particular. She perceives it as permeating through every day taken-for-granted routines and practices as "maybe a part of an experience with literacy or science, reflected in the precision of the mathematical concepts or in the wonder of technology or the natural world" (p. 340). Bone (2007) views fostering a *spiritual withness* or connectedness with others by encouraging peer interactions and co-operative activities like sharing food, gardening or reciting *karakias*; or as expressions of children's inner emotional or spiritual selves, manifested in their art or creativity (Bone, 2005; Wilson, 2010). Bone (2008b) finds traces of spirituality within everyday curriculum, in the respect adults can show towards children, by allowing them to self-choose activities of their interest and use positive words to help them build a healthy self-image and thus awaken their soul.

In spite of the contradictions in fostering spirituality, the common thread binding them is the focus on building a sense of connectedness with oneself, with others, or with the cosmos. Another contention within the topic of spiritual nurturing is

between what is more significant - opportunities for "doing" or "being still and silent" (Haskins, 2011, p. 35). While Bone's (2008b) denies spirituality as an exclusively inner experience and fostered through social contact, Haskins (2011), Williams and Broadley (2012), and Toso (2011) insist that providing time and space for non-doing and engaging in stillness and silence can help children focus inward and nourish their soul. In contrast, Whitehead (2009) believes in fostering children's spirituality or inner wellbeing through participation in joyful activities such as music-making, singing, and dancing to stimulate their creativity and self-awareness.

Whitehead (2008) regards teachers playing the role of protagonists in the revival of this unarticulated dimension within ECE, through creative teaching practices. This view guides teachers to first and foremost realise the need for a positive impact on the spirit of all involved, including staff, children and *whanau*, by recognising their ability to ensure a joyful and warm climate, founded on respectful, reciprocal relationships (Dress, 2012).

Potential benefits of spiritual nurturing to children

The topic of children's spiritual cultivation is woven together by the benefits of meaningful interactions with self, others, nature, or the entire cosmos, intended at awakening these young lives to the interrelatedness of all life (NAEYC, 2012). This is the common thread that helps safeguard children from getting entangled in commercialism, mechanism and materialism which the study believed to defile the modern world and withhold spirituality from gaining its rightful place in human development (Hart, 2005).

Among the common benefits of children's spiritual development is an evoked sense of wonder and intense joy in them (Harris, 2007; Haskins, 2011). Based on his direct qualitative study of 150 cases, Hart (2005) infers that this wonderment fosters children's creativity and curiosity to ask profound and speculative questions, to doubt, reason, experiment, infer and develop a quest for personal identity along with generating reverence for others. Such reflective attitude helps build a positive aptitude for lifelong learning, and facilitates 'holistic development' (McHenry & Buerk, 2008).

According to Harris (2007), admiration for the natural world arouses from its sheer magnitude and carries the power of transformative thinking, which helps children decipher that all life is interconnected. Such admiration allows children's focus to shift from gross materialism to a deeper reflection on the meaning of life, the universe, its mysterious workings, and their place in it (Wolf, 2001). Also, realising that we are all part of the same universe, regardless of cultural, racial, religious or other differences, carries the potential of inducing profound realisation of respect and compassion for all life to lay the groundwork for a peaceful coexistence in the world (Harris, 2013; Hart, 2005; Wolf, 2001).

Apart from wonderment, spiritual nurturing also lends humanness to the human experience (Ruddock & Cameron, 2010). A study by Pere (1991) shows that building *manaaki*, which reflects the 'finer qualities of people' including love, care, respect, and hospitality' (as cited in Bone, Cullen & Loveridge, 2007), helps to elevate a child's spirit. Ikeda (2010) similarly endorses that altruistic experiences give confidence to young children and become a firm foundation for their spiritual

growth. These positive traits help build what Harris (2007) terms as *relational spirituality*, shaping strong, trusting, reciprocal relationships and a peaceful and comfortable learning environment, where all children readily explore new opportunities and develop holistically. Such empathic relationships create a platform for healthy exchange of opinions through patient listening and open-mindedness, where children together unravel the mysteries of life as capable members of the community (Hart, 2005).

With regards to benefits of interactions with oneself, Haskins (2011) and Harris (2013) believe that, when children engage in quiet activities and learn to respect stillness, they get aligned to their true inner core, which makes room for self-reflection, imaginativeness, concentration and mindfulness. Harris (2013) considers fully engaging in ordinary experiences without rushing as an impetus to help construct pleasant visual memories for children, which they often use later to self-evoke wonderment in their everyday lives (Bone, 2007). The Ministry of Education (1999), OFSTED (2004) and Whitehead (2009) associate the benefits of fostering spirituality in children with an increased self-worth, a positive self-image, and personal insights, which are needed for revitalisation and wisdom to lead purposeful existences. In the light of the above perspectives, Hart (2015) rightfully perceives spirituality as an association of the children's spirit with the here and now of every moment and in the connections they make with what the world entails, boldly contradicting the traditional view of spiritual as sometimes described as separate from us, out of this world or transcendent.

Conclusion

This article has shown that regarding spirituality in childhood helps to clarify the complexity around this seemingly confusing, complex yet absolutely crucial dimension of child development and wellbeing. Steiner aptly encapsulates the impact of spiritual development on children by stating that "the real secret of human development is that what is ensouled or made spiritual at a particular stage of life is later revealed physically, often after many years" (as cited in Bone, 2005, p. 311). Whitehead (2009) affirms that spirituality in education incorporates a curriculum that "educates for all dimensions of humankind and provides a source of nurturance for the spirit that values physical, mental and spiritual knowledge and skills" (p. 16). This diverse range of perspectives around this topic, seem to converge at one crucial point that, regardless of teachers' personal beliefs and values, they need to recognise the importance of spiritual education to foster children's 'holistic development' and 'wellbeing' (Wilson, 2010). This is believed to be a win-win situation for both professionals and children, by imparting a renewed vigour and meaning to teachers' practice and by enriching children's lives and subsequently nurturing them into social agents who will create a more peaceful world.

References

Bone, J. (2005). An ethical journey: Rights, relationships and reflexivity. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 30 (1),* 1–6

Bone, J. (2007). *Everyday spirituality: Supporting the spiritual experience of young children in three early childhood educational settings.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Palmerston North: New Zealand.

Bone, J. (2008a). Creating relational spaces: everyday spirituality in early childhood settings. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 16(3),* 343-356. doi:10.1080/13502930802292122

Bone, J. (2008b). Exploring trauma, loss and healing: spirituality, Te Whāriki and early childhood education. *International Journal Of Children's Spirituality, 13(3),* 265-276.

Bone, J., Cullen. J., Loveridge, J. (2007) Everyday Spirituality: an aspect of the holistic curriculum in action. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. 8 (4).*

Cheryl, V.M. (2012). *Promoting Spiritual 'Well-Being': A Quasi-Experimental Test of Hay and Nye's Theory of Children's Spirituality.* Dissertation, Northcentral University, Prescott Valley, Arizona.

Dress, A. (2012, January/February). Teacher Development: Reimagining Teacher Development: Cultivating Spirit. *Exchange,* 28-31.

Harris, K. I. (2007). Re-Conceptualizing Spirituality in the Light of Educating Young Children. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 12(3),* 263-275.

Harris, K. (2013). Teacher, I had a dream: a glimpse of the spiritual domain of children using project-based learning. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 18(3),* 281-293. doi:10.1080/1364436X.2013.858665

Hart, T. (2005). Spiritual Experiences and Capacities of Children and Youth. Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. *Sage,* 163-178.

Haskins, C. (2011). The Gift of Silence. *Montessori Life: A Publication of the American Montessori Society, 23 (2),* 34-39

Hyde, B. (2008). Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and *Connectedness.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ikeda, D. (2010). *A new humanism: The university addresses of Daisaku Ikeda.* London: I.B. Tauris.

McCreery, E. (1994). Towards an Understanding of the Notion of the Spiritual in Education. *Early Child Development and Care, 100,* 93-99.

McHenry, J.D., Buerk, K.J. (2008, January). Infants and Toddlers Meet the Natural World. *Beyond the Journal: Young Children on the web:* NAEYC

Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum.* Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education (1999). *Health & Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum.* Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.

NAEYC Kicks Off New Interest Forums at the 2011 Annual Conference. (2012). *YC: Young Children, 67(2),* 56-59.

Office for Standards in Education (2004). *Promoting and Evaluating pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.* London, England: OFSTED.

Pere, R. (1991) *Te Wheke: A Celebration of Infinite Wisdom.* Gisborne, New Zealand: Ao Ako Global Learning.

Ruddock, B. & Cameron, R.J. (2010). Spirituality in children and young people: a suitable topic for educational and child psychologists? *Educational Psychology in Practice, 26(1),* 25-34.

Toso, V.M., (2011, December). Reconceptualising spirituality as a philosophy of practice for Pasifika early childhood education in New Zealand: A Samoan Perspective. *Pacific-Asian Education Journal, 23 (2),* 129-138.

Wolf, A. (2000). How to nurture the spirit in non-sectarian environments. *Young Children,* 34-35.

Wolf, A. (2001). The Space-Age Source of Spiritual Nurturing. *Montessori Life, 13(1),* 35-39.

Whitehead, A. (2009). Revitalising Incorporating the spiritual dimension in early childhood practice. *Early Education, 45* (Autumn/Winter)

Williams, N., Broadley, M.E. (2012). *Ngä Taonga Whakaako – Underlying Theoretical Principles of Tikanga.* Retrieved from https://akoaotearoa.ac.nz/download/ng/file/group-3993/nga-taonga-whakaako-underlying-theoretical-principles-of-tikanga-wairuatanga.pdf

Wilson, R.A. (2010, September/ October) Wellness and Nature: Spiritual life of Children. *Exchange,* 24-27

Zhang, K. (2012). Spirituality and early childhood special education: exploring a 'forgotten' dimension. *International Journal Of Children's Spirituality, 17(1),* 39-49.