

Holism and the self in early childhood education — me, we, and the Universe.

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That early childhood education learning and teaching ought to be holistic in approach seems uncontested. *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017), like most early childhood curricula, defines holism based on the Aristotelian view that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This paper invites a conversation about the conventional perception of holism and *self* in early childhood education. Teachers' beliefs about holism matter, as do how the self is conceptualised in relation to, within, and between me, others, and the Universe, for these are instrumental in how relational connectedness underpins teaching and learning.

Introduction

I am Pākehā and Tangata Tiriti. My birthplace is Whanganui, alongside the Whanganui awa (river) where I swam, caught eels and herrings, and painted as a child artist, as I do even today. The Whanganui awa was granted personhood by an Act of the Aotearoa New Zealand Parliament in 2017. This means it is the first river in the world to be recognised as *an indivisible and living being with all the rights, powers, duties and liabilities of a legal person* (NZ Parliament, 2017). This Act confers a legal personality on the Whanganui awa giving it the same rights and responsibilities as a person. This practice is not new in Aotearoa New Zealand. In 2014, Parliament granted Te Urewera, formerly a national park, the same legal status for the Tūhoe iwi (tribe). The Whanganui iwi have a deep connection with the awa, as expressed in a *whakataukākī*, a traditional saying:

*Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au —
I am the river, and the river is me.*

For me, this *whakataukākī* and the legal status of the Whanganui awa speak of the intimate and dynamic connectedness which is at the heart of appreciating holism. As years have passed, I realise more deeply how the river *is* me, and I *am* the river (*my emphasis*). Drawing from this *whakataukākī*, this paper explores the notion of holism and *self* in education, with a specific focus on teachers. Teachers' conceptions about holism and *self*, after all, shape how they come to teach and *live* holism in their teaching.

Holism, the *self*, and the early childhood curriculum

There seems to be a “yearning for a sense of the self as a whole, of a drive toward the reintegration of the self” (Gifford, 2006, p. 3). Podcasts, self-care books, and other commercial products abound, enticing people to enrich their lives. Many

are predicated on a belief that addressing separate dimensions such as nutrition, exercise, meditation and spirituality will cumulatively enhance holistic wellbeing. There is no question that we ought to aim for education that is holistic. In His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s message for Earth Day 2022, he said: “We need a more holistic education, an education that incorporates inner values, such as a compassionate concern for others’ well-being” (para 1).

Our early childhood curriculum, like many others, upholds holism as an ideal. Holism is often described, consistent with the Aristotelian view, as the whole person being more than the sum of its parts. Principle two of *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand (MoE, 2017), refers to Holistic Development: Kotahitanga.

Firstly, it identifies dimensions of human development, namely, cognitive (hinengaro), physical (tinana), emotional (whatumanawa), spiritual (wairua), and social and cultural. Such dimensions, it states, need to be viewed holistically as these are “closely interwoven and interdependent” (MoE, 2017, p. 19). Secondly, it suggests that “because children develop holistically, they need a broad and rich curriculum that enables them to grow their capabilities across all dimensions” (MoE 2017, p. 19), and that “every aspect of the context – physical surroundings, emotional state, relationships with others and immediate needs – will affect what children learn from any particular experience”. Thirdly, it has a statement I have yet to untangle which proposes that “a holistic approach sees the child as a person who wants to learn, the task as a meaningful whole and the whole as greater than the sum of its parts” (MoE, 2017, p. 19).

The problem with holism being more than the sum of its parts

The term ‘the whole as greater than the sum of its parts’, presents an inherent dichotomy. When we disaggregate holistic development into dimensions (cognitive/hinengaro, physical/tinana, emotional/whatumanawa, spiritual/wairua, and social and cultural), there is an implicit tension between the ‘whole’ and ‘sum of its parts’. In spite of these dimensions being considered interdependent, often in the reality of curriculum design and even in teaching and learning, these dimensions take precedence over the holistic intent.

This ‘whole and the sum of its parts’ dilemma is not just confined to holism in education. For example, referring to the French biologist John Stewart, who wrote *Breathing Life Back into Biology* (2019), Amy Cohen Varela (2022), said that:

the models of mind and the way biologists think about life have become progressively more machine-like and technological... Defining life, for example, by saying it’s managed or engineered by a genetic code that is a group of proteins that code for more proteins and biochemical reactions.

Clearly, addressing the parts in this way, rather than the relational systems, can lead to a dichotomy, as exemplified in this inadequate definition of *life*.

My earlier enquiries into holism led me to suggest three forms of relational connectedness—namely, inter-relational connectedness, intra-relational connectedness, and trans-relational connectedness (Gibbs, 2006). In spite of my emphasis on their intimate transactional nature, the mere identification of relational connectedness into such dimensions has led to a sense of separation, which was never the intent. In reality, the systems with which we are intimately connected, dynamically interact in a transactional manner such that as one system changes, so too do others which, in turn, change the former. That is the nature of transactional relational connectedness. Nothing remains constant.

This paper, then, invites us to think about our conventional perception of holism in early childhood, and to open opportunities to reconsider the way in which we view the “whole” self as an independent, separate entity in our thinking, practice and curriculum in early childhood education.

Holism and “the lie of the separate self”

Dan Siegel (2021) talks about the need to dissolve “the lie of the separate self” (para. 7), the notion that the self is isolated and separate. Holism is the absence of separation. Holism presents a view that there is no separation between humans and other humans, or with the world as a Universe. There is no separation between humans and what might be referred to as the ‘divine presence’, the essential essence (metaphorically or otherwise) of that which creates a sense of awe and wonderment. And, as suggested earlier, there is a dynamic of relational connectedness which is ever-present and also transactional.

Cynthia Bourgeault (2008, pp. 30-32), a modern day mystic and Episcopal priest, quotes the Scripture “Love your neighbour as yourself” [Mark 12:31] and makes the point that this is not “Love your neighbour “as much as yourself” but rather “as yourself”. There is no duality—your neighbour is you and you are your neighbour. In this sense, the self as ‘me’ is not a separate entity from the self as ‘we’. Rather, ‘me’ is ‘we’, and ‘we’ is ‘me’. Or, as Dan Siegel says “MWe (Me + We)” (Siegel, 2022), there is no duality.

The *whakatauākī*, *I am the river and the river is me*, illustrates the deep affinity between, with, and within the self, others, nature and the universe as lived in te ao Māori. Likewise, Leenhardt (Clifford, 1893), used the term *cosmomorphism* when describing the synergistic relationship between Melanesians and their environment.

For these people, an isolated individual is totally indeterminate, indistinct and featureless until he [*sic*] can find his position within the natural and social world in which he is inserted. The confines between the self and the world are annulled to the point that the material body itself is no guarantee of the sort of recognition of identity which is typical of our own culture. (Environment and Ecology. n.d., History)

Gifford (2006), makes a point that the postmodern age fosters a belief that we have multiple selves which are situational such that, for instance, our self in the family context is distinct from our self in the workplace. Drawing on the thinking of the environmentalist John Muir (1911, p. 211) who said “when we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe”, Gifford stresses the need to heal the separations of culture and nature—to dissolve, as Siegel (2021, para. 7) says, “the lie of the separate self.”

Being with a rimu tree

Recently I walked the Queen Charlotte Track. We encountered a rimu tree said to be over 1,000 years old. Like all trees, this tree sheds leaves and debris which offers sustenance around the root structure of the trunk. This tree’s shedding provides for many ecosystems for flora and fauna. The tree offers nesting for insects, birds and other creatures. Plants find their habitat in the trunk, around the trunk, in the branches, and around the root system. This tree does not stand separate from other trees—it provides, shelter, shade, and water precipitation for other trees. In fact, this tree’s branches shape themselves in ways that allow the saplings to grow and flourish below (see, for instance, Dench, 2017.)

For argument’s sake, we might also view this rimu along the dimensions of traditional curricula. The trunk core bands measure time (mathematics), the flexibility of the tree branches and the trunk bend without breaking (physics), the ‘fruit’ provides birds with food to eat and seeds to deposit (natural science), and as the wind moves through the branches we have the aesthetics of music (the arts). When the curricula is disaggregated into such dimensions, we are in danger of failing to capture some essential questions about the rimu such as: Where am I in this? Where are we in this? Who am I? Who am I with this tree? Who is the tree in relation to me? Who are we together? Who are we together with the neighbouring trees? What sensations do I perceive in my body when I am in the presence of this tree?

Holism and *self*—where does my body begin and end?

This is a deceptively simple question, yet one which often underpins our definition of *self*. We have an unfortunate tendency to try to locate the individual self within the boundaries of the skin, and beyond the skin boundary becomes our external world. We even may teach in ways that implicitly assume and affirm this view. In reality our *self* resides within, beyond and between the skin and the external world. We might describe the physical body as that which is tangible (the structure of the body that includes such systems involving the flesh, and bones), and the intangible body. The intangible body involves many systems such as motor emulation, readiness potential, mirror neurons, neural networks, and proprioception. Emotions and feelings, which are sometimes used interchangeably, provide a useful analogy of the states of self which extend within and beyond the skin boundary of the body (see, for instance, Damasio, 2004). Elaborating on this, my colleague Richard Valasek shared that:

the emotion is the internal event involving hormones, neurotransmitters, and changes in physiological state. A feeling is your conscious awareness of how you feel in your body as a result of these changes. Other people see your emotions, you are more aware of your feelings. (personal communication, 2020.)

As we extend beyond the tangible barrier of our skin, we enter into what has been described as the peripersonal space which reaches even further into the extrapersonal space, but the boundary between the two is extremely blurred and fluid, even at different positions around our body. Peripersonal space refers to that space immediately surrounding the body in which objects can be grasped and manipulated, and extrapersonal space extends beyond this (de Vignemont et al., 2021; Matsudua et al., 2021).

At the same time, our body is not impermeable. We are leaky vessels. Fluids, molecules, energy constantly flow and interact in a dynamic, ever-changing interplay.

Holism and the *self*—playing with where my body begins and ends

There are many playful exercises which help us appreciate where our body begins and ends, or does not end or begin for that matter! Here is one example:

Positioning: Finding your place of comfort

Stand and draw your attention inwards—how do you feel?

What do you sense in your mind, in your stomach, in your hands, legs?

Slowly turn slightly clockwise and stop. What sensations do you now perceive?

Is this position more comfortable than the previous position?

Repeat at various intervals as you circle, stopping and dwelling, place by place.

You may notice specific places of positioning where you have a deeper sense of comfort or ease, whereas other positions may give you a feeling of unease or discomfort. This exercise is important for several reasons.

First, it highlights the dynamic fluidity of our connectedness with our surroundings. Our sense of beingness, our identification of *self*, is not static or separate but seems to vary in time and from place to place. Secondly, it opens opportunities to explore how we position ourselves when we work with children. Finding that place of comfort increases the sense of relational connectedness and therefore becomes instrumental when learning and teaching. No evolvment will happen without beginning at a place of comfort—a place of *internal* and *external* synergy and connectedness with the other. Seldom will we risk venturing into unease from a place of uncertainty. Rather, it is in this place I refer to as comfort or ease, a presence (in a verbing sense) where both the teacher and child are knowingly secure and at ease with themselves and the other within that situation, that we can facilitate the dynamic transactional systems of learning.

Holism and the *self*—making meaning and the in-between space

It is natural for us to want to make meaning of our situations. Meaning-making, in a holistic sense, is not that which occurs in the individual's mind or body as is often believed. It happens in a participatory sense. The notion of participatory sense-making is meaning that is constructed not by the individual alone or the people around us, but in the space between us—the in-between space (see, for instance, Hanne De Jaegher & Ezequiel Di Paolo, 2007).

Much is being discovered about the intricate and dynamic interplay between our presence and the environment (Virgin Radio, 2022). A recent research report in *ScienceDaily* (2022), suggests that we are surrounded by an invisible aura of air cleaning molecules. Lead researcher, Jonathan Williams, says, “instead of the traditional spiritual aura you might think of, scientists say this is a self-developed oxidation field” (ScienceDaily, 2022, para, 12). This interplay between us and the environment, and between the environment and us, deserves more research. Williams goes further, and suggests that, “we need to study [this self-developed oxidation field] rather than just measuring what [chemicals, for instance] a sofa emits. We need to measure what a sofa and a person make together as the interaction of the emissions with our field is more important” (ScienceDaily, 2022, para, 12). It may be just a sofa emitting chemicals into the atmosphere, but we are not separate from the sofa and, the sofa is not separate from us.

Holism and the *self*—the patterns that connect

One starting point for reconceptualising the concept of holism in teaching and learning might be to consider Bateson's (1979) idea of understanding ‘the pattern that connects’. In his writings, Bateson asks, ‘what pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?’. All is inextricably interconnected—there is no dualism—such that as one changes so too does the other and, in turn, so does the former. This idea of focussing on ‘the pattern that connects’ influences the ways in which teachers question children (and themselves) to construct understandings. It also reorientates the curriculum from the amalgam of separate dimensions into one which focusses on the relationality within the whole—an appreciation of the dynamic relational connectedness with, within and between the child, teacher, and the Universe.

This patterning is illustrated in all our activities. When you approach children who are playing together, what body movement patterns do you find yourself using? What positioning do you adopt? What are the sensations occurring in your body and the space between your body and the children? What movement patterns do the children exhibit? How do these influence your patterns? Are these patterns the same when the context varies? (the sand-play area; the water tray).

When you are admiring a beautiful painting, or listening to music that overwhelms you, what patterns do you engage in? What bodily patterns become apparent when you sense this beauty? Does the painting ‘change’ as you become more aware of these bodily responses?

Holism and the *self*—‘sensory bubbles’ and human-centric perspectives

We understand our world and ourselves through our own sensory limitations or as Yong (2022) says, our ‘sensory bubbles’. He cites the zoologist Jakob von Uexküll who describes these sensory bubbles as *Unwelt* meaning not just our and each animal’s environment, but “specifically the part of those surroundings that an animal can sense and experience” (Yong, 2022, p.5). While some animals may share some of the same senses as us, and us of them, each has a unique *Unwelt*. Some animals hear more acutely than us; some less. Humans’ visual acuity may be more or less than that of other animals. The limitations of our sensory characteristics bias the ways in which we perceive the world, including how we perceive others and even, some may suggest, our relationship with flora and fauna. Our interpretation of the ‘world’ reflects our *Unwelt*, rather than appreciating the *Unwelt* of others, or the *Unwelt* that is in-between us.

Yong (2022) also notes that our traditional and persisting Aristotelian view of the senses as being sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, limits what we have come to understand about the scope of sensory awareness. He cites, for instance; “proprioception, the awareness of your own body, which is distinct from touch, and equilibrioception, the sense of balance, which has links to both touch and vision” (p. 10). Further, we often characterise animals within the traditional confines of the Aristotelian view of senses such that we become biased by our own senses—a human-centric response. That animals may have senses beyond humans such as the capacity to perceive electromagnetic rays and to detect body heat, for instance, exemplify the significance of *Unwelt*. As we delve into the nature of our connectedness with and within nature, our perceptions are often shaped by our human-centric views, that seeing, knowing and feeling are interpreted through the ways in which our sensory capacities as humans shape the way we experience the world.

Let’s play ‘what if’

Our fingertips are not designed to feel ‘emotions’.

But *what if*, we allowed our fingertips to feel the sensations of sadness, joy, anger?

You may well sense qualitative changes in your body as you dwell on these ‘emotions’ in your fingertips.

Another example.

For many indigenous cultures, hair is often seen as an extension of self and a connection to the world. It is said that the Native Americans sense position in space and direction through the movement sensations in their hair.

Whether this is folklore or not is really not an issue here.

So let’s play *what if*?

What if your hair gave you a sense of which direction you should go?

(If you are balding, as is the case of the author, then use a further ‘what if I had hair’!)

When you ask this question and focus on your hair, do you find your head or mind turning? Or your body? Do you sense changes in your body?

Do you sense a movement towards one direction rather than the other?

Holism and the *self*—timing and synchronicity

Another way of reconceptualising holism, especially within ourselves as teachers, is to give a deeper attention to timing. Timing is obviously instrumental in synchronicity—the sense of harmonic resonance with, within, and between our inner and outer worlds. When there is synergy between our sense of relational connectedness within, with others, with nature, and with the universe, then there is a place of authenticity (Gibbs, 2006). We might call this on-going homeostasis—not static, but dynamic and evolving.

Rouel Cazanjan (personal communication, October 2022) suggests that homeostasis is “all the different systems of the body working together seamlessly to create the experience of the body being one thing”. I suggest it is all of this, but more—it is the sensation of the body being one thing while intimately connected to, or harmonious with, all that is—including others, the child’s culture, environment, and universe. Within this is resonance, there is not dissonance or dysfunction. Cazanjan uses the example of an orchestra. If the orchestra plays in time and in tune with itself then it is called music; whereas if it plays out of time and out of tune it is called noise, chaos, or dissonance. Such ‘orchestrations’ happen when we take an action knowing that the timing is the right timing even if we cannot explain our decision at the time to take that action. Our life experiences teach us this—we visit a family member of a child for no other reason than knowing that you are compelled at the time to do so, and finding that it is the right timing for what was happening in your lives. Such happens when one teaches holistically in response to the timing of actions which bring forth synchronicity.

Holism and the *self*—learning to walk *with* a new walk

A further aspect for reconceptualising the concept of holism in early childhood teaching and learning relates to synergetic connectivity. For me, this was learning to walk *with* nature, rather than walk *in* nature. For many years I have enjoyed walking in nature. When I do, I experience my spirit being uplifted. However, when challenged to walk *with* nature, the notion of universal sentience within relational connectedness opened for me new appreciations of being intimately relationally connected (inter-relationally, intra-rationally and trans-rationally connected) in dynamic, living and authentic ways with, and within, the universal patterns of life. The trees, insects, flowers, all seemed to relate in new ways. It becomes an expression of being within the systems of holism.

The benefits of being with nature are well documented. Dan Siegel (2021), for instance, makes the point that the more children “spend time in nature the better they are able to focus attention, lower their anxiety or their depression because the mind is as much relational with people as it is relational with nature”. Such relational connectedness embracing me, we and the Universe, reframes notions of the *self* and of holism within early childhood education.

David Branwell (2022, para 3) makes the astute observation that “we are not ‘at two with nature’ as Woody Allen once quipped of himself, but each and every one of us is interdependent with nature and each other... As a tree ‘apples’, so a planet ‘peoples’! You didn’t come into this world, you came out of it!” (Branwell, 2022, para 5).

Conclusion

*Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au —
I am the river, and the river is me.*

The Whanganui awa is recognised as *an indivisible and living being with all the rights, powers, duties and liabilities of a legal person* (NZ Parliament, 2017) giving it the same rights and responsibilities as a person. For me, this *whakatauākī* and the legal status of the Whanganui awa speak of the intimate and dynamic relational connectedness which is at the heart of appreciating holism. Me, we, and the Universe—there is no dualism. Let me conclude with words from the jazz musician John McLaughlin who finds his inspiration in the dynamic holistic connection between all things:

The scientists tell me the planet orbits the sun because of mutual ‘gravity’ which is mutual attraction’. To me this confers awareness to our planet because it is in a direct relationship with our sun... in addition, it performs the most magnificent and noble sacrifice of all: it consumes its own body and in the process gives light and warmth to plant and animal life on earth without which they will die. It is also in direct relationship with all its planets by governing their dance around it. (McLaughlin, n.d., para 5-8)

As teachers, our beliefs about holism and the *self*, matter. Our relational connectedness becomes empowering as we “dissolve the lie of the separate self” (Siegel, 2021, para. 7) by entwining in the dynamic transactional systems involving me, we and the Universe.

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Glossary

Tangata Tiriti refers to the people of the Treaty of Waitangi, specifically those of non-Māori origin who live under the Treaty of Waitangi.