

Understanding holistic wellbeing through culturally diverse lenses.

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This article explores notions of holism and acknowledges that different cultures and societies have a wide range of beliefs of what holism might be, how it is practiced and how it can be supported. *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) is a holistic curriculum in its own right and yet it is important to acknowledge the cultural differences that shape varying forms of holism when working with children and families. Kaiako in Aotearoa are entrusted with fostering the learning and wellbeing of children from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and their openness to the different forms of holism and wellbeing are required to ensure that all voices are heard and that all families can feel supported. The authors recognise the challenges that particularly beginning whānau might face as they navigate a range of holistic health and wellbeing models that families practice and the commitment they have while taking guidance from *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Introduction

According to *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) “all cultural groups have beliefs, traditions, and child-rearing practices that place value on specific knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions” (MoE, 2017, p. 20). For the early childhood kaiako, teaching in the culturally diverse settings of Aotearoa, understanding cultural perspectives, histories and holistic views of children and their families is critical to developing culturally responsive and effective practices that support the multiple aspects of wellbeing.

Holism or being holistic is understood as “a philosophical theory according to which a fundamental feature of nature is the existence of wholes which are more than the composite assembly of the parts and which always tend to become more highly developed and complex” (Cheng-Tek Tai, 2012, p. 92). To understand the meaning of holistic, all possible human components are to be considered, as well as their interaction, the way they fit into existence, and their place in the Universe.

Cultural perspectives: Pasifika

Tapasā (MoE, 2018) suggests that Pacific peoples “inhabit different realities, learn and engage in multiple ways and come into early learning settings ... with unique skills, talents and knowledge” (p. 9). *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) contributes to this perspective, stressing the importance of embracing a holistic approach and “... to be aware of the

different views that cultures represented in their early childhood setting may have of child development and the role of family and whānau” (p. 19).

Pasifika peoples is an umbrella term to describe culturally diverse peoples from the Pacific region who now reside in Aotearoa but continue to have strong family connections to Pacific Island nations. Pasifika people in Aotearoa are becoming increasingly diverse in their cultural identities, cultural practices and beliefs. Although different ethnic-specific practices are embraced, a holistic approach to development and wellbeing overarches many Pacific cultures. According to Tu’itahi (2009), the concept of health refers to wellbeing of the whole person and is consistent with Pacific holistic worldviews. Wellbeing is not considered just in the context of one particular individual but relates to communities, their environment and relationships within those communities.

One of the Pasifika holistic health models, Fonofale, incorporates values and beliefs of Samoans, Cook Islanders, Tongans, Niueans, Tokelauans and Fijians. It encompasses the core foundations of life, emphasising its vital aspects: family, cultural values and beliefs, spiritual, physical, mental. For an early childhood kaiako, it is paramount to understand the interrelatedness of all of these aspects and that Pasifika wellbeing is about sustaining balance between them (Mental Health Commission, 2001).

Another Pasifika holistic health model, the Fonua model, is a Tongan framework that encompasses five dimensions: sino (physical), ‘atamai (mental), laumalie (spiritual), kaingal (community), and ‘ataakai (environment) (Tu’itahi, 2009). Similar to Fonofale, Fonua model of wellbeing is about the harmony of life, where all five dimensions are interwoven and complementary to each other. Therefore, to address child’s and family’s wellbeing means to address all five dimensions. The meaning of the word ‘Fonua’ also contributes to understanding of vital connections with the land for Pasifika people ‘Fonua’, ‘land’, is the source of life, a place to belong, a concept that is present across many other Pacific cultures, as well as Māori culture.

Vai Niu is another holistic Pasifika-centred framework that supports child and family wellbeing and mental health. Based on Pasifika values, Vai Niu acknowledges the diverse worldviews of Pasifika peoples, emphasising the relationships they have with language, cultural values, spirituality, communal relationships and the wider environment (Funganitao, 2019). Vai Niu, founded on Pasifika ways of knowing and doing, accentuates connectivity with other human beings and parts of culture, emphasising that native language plays a crucial role in positive social experiences for Pasifika peoples, and community connections are at the core of families’ holistic wellbeing and mental health (Funganitao, 2019). It is important to note that exploring Pasifika wellbeing stretches beyond holistic health models. Holistic wellbeing is deeply rooted in Pasifika values that are universal across the Pacific nations. Multiple dimensions of holistic wellbeing earlier discussed originate from the key Pasifika values like respect, service, leadership, reciprocal relationships, love, family, belonging and spirituality (Rimoni & Averil, 2019). These values are broader than kaiako may realise and are interconnected, therefore, a holistic lens must be applied when engaging in effective pedagogies to support the wellbeing of Pasifika children, their families and community. As *Tapasā* asserts in Ngā Turu, enhancing cultural knowledge is critical for the kaiako to be able to “...establish and maintain collaborative and respectful relationships and professional behaviours that enhance learning and wellbeing for Pacific learners” (MoE, 2018, p. 8).

Chinese traditions

A holistic approach to understanding wellbeing is also well established in Chinese traditions, which date back more than 2000 years, suggesting that “Man stands between heaven and earth” (Zmiewski, 1986, p. 23). The energy of the universe is conceptualised as a creative interplay between two mutually dependent forces – yin and yang – and the human body is understood to be a microcosmic representation of this reciprocity. The importance of balance of the external and internal forces is emphasised, and three key concepts are critical to maintain it: yin-yang, five elements and the vital energy of chi (qi) (Chen-Tek Tai, 2012).

In a well-balanced system, finding balance between yin and yang is important to maintain holistic wellbeing. Yin comprises of passive characteristics: cold, dark, soft and feminine; whereas yang is associated with active, hot, bright, hard and masculine characteristics. All aspects of the Universe can be described in terms of these two forces and every phenomenon can be divided further according to the interplay between yin and yang (Chen-Tek Tai 2012; Garvey & Lifang, 2020).

The Five Elements, also believed to originate in ancient China, where wood, fire, earth, metal and water were used to explain the phenomena of the complex relationship between material objects, human body and the natural world. Counterbalancing each other, the Five Elements are believed to also represent different human body organs: the heart (fire), kidneys (water), liver (wood), spleen (earth), and lung (metal). In this complex interconnection and interdependence and “mutually promoting and conquering relationship, the world moves on” (Chen-Tek Tai, 2012, p. 93).

The vital energy of all, chi (qi), takes various forms in the human body, being both substance and non-substance, the energy that flows through all organs of the body, and the heavenly and cosmic force that makes a human an inseparable part of the Universe (Chen-Tek Tai, 2012; Garvey & Lifang, 2020).

Being holistic, the human organism is influenced by spiritual, psychic and non-earthly forces (cosmic, solar and lunar forces), as well as by forces existing in the immediate environment (nutrition, climate, electromagnetic and geophysical forces) (Zmiewski, 1986). It is, therefore, believed that disruption within any of these elements inevitably affects holistic wellbeing and health. All factors, whether internal or external, are interrelated and the physio-environmental balance is critical to maintain harmony and holistic wellbeing. *Te Whāriki* emphasises for kaiako to be “sensitive to the different ways that the diverse families represented in their setting may understand and seek to promote wellbeing” (MoE, 2017, p. 26).

Te ao Māori

In a Māori worldview, te ao Māori, the notion of holistic wellbeing can be explained with using Te Whare Tapa Whā model - the house with four cornerstones. Just like a house needs all sides to be strong and able to bear loads equally, a person needs to be well in all areas related to wellbeing. Sir Mason Durie described four cornerstones of Te Whare Tapa Whā as: taha tinana (physical wellbeing), taha hinengaro (mental wellbeing), taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing) and taha whānau (family wellbeing) (Health Navigator, 2023). For a person’s holistic wellbeing to be optimal, all four areas need to be looked after, alongside the whenua (land) the whare stands on. Particular focus is required for the

wairua of a person as according to Kiyimba and Anderson (2022), wairua exists before a person is born and lives on after a person dies. The wairua of a person can visit others in visions and dreams and might act as a guide or offer a warning (Kiyimba & Anderson, 2022). While this notion is reflected in the ideas of Christianity where a person's soul can be understood as the essence of a person (Trousedale, 2013), the way the wairua is nourished might differ.

Dr Rose Rangimarie Pere (1997) shared her insights on holistic health and wellbeing, basing her ideas on the infinite wisdom of Māori. Dr Pere evoked the image of an octopus (te wheke), whose tentacles are often intertwined, as a representation of the interconnectivity of the various areas of wellbeing that need to be cared for to achieve holistic wellbeing. Pere (1997) identifies the areas of wellbeing as te whānau (the family), waioara (total wellbeing for the individual and family), wairuatanga (spirituality), hinengaro (the mind), taha tinana (physical wellbeing), whanaungatanga (extended family), mauri (life force in people and objects), mana ake (unique identity of individuals and family), hā a koro ma, a kui ma (breath of life from forbearers) whatumanawa (the open and healthy expression of emotion). Similarly, to Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā, te wheke also places a strong emphasis on the importance of a positive relationship and connection with whānau, so much so, that the head of the octopus is considered to represent the whānau, hapu and iwi (Love, 2004).

The understanding of value and importance of relationships, interconnectedness, and a holistic view of wellbeing are reflected in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), as the curriculum is considered to be holistic. The principles of whakamana (empowerment), kotahitanga (holistic development), whānau tangata (family and community) and ngā hononga (relationships) are interwoven with the strands of mana atua (wellbeing), mana whenua (belonging), mana tangata (contribution), mana reo (communication and mana aotūroa (exploration) interwoven to create te whāriki (a mat to stand on). Just as Durie and Pere highlight the importance of looking at the person as a whole, recognising their various parts or components, the curriculum, too, is created from weaving single strands and principles together to create a whole. However, while the theory of creating such a curriculum is simple, the practicalities are far from being clear cut. Kaiako might not have sufficient knowledge about the tamariki and whānau in their care, nor might they always have the necessary relationships with the families to gather the information needed. Māori ways of knowing and being cannot be learned in a theoretical course offered by an education provider, as what is the right way is determined by whānau, hapu and iwi (MoE, 2017). Therefore, kaiako rely on whānau sharing their ways of being and knowing and having sufficient trust to share observations and knowledge about their tamaiti, their aspirations for their child and ways in which they want kaiako to work with and alongside their tamaiti to support a child's holistic wellbeing.

Indian perspectives

Another holistic view of wellbeing and health is practiced in India, called Ayurveda. According to Cheng-Tek Tai (2012), ayus means life, and for the purpose of this approach to health, it combines the body, mind and spirit. To be healthy and well means to find balance between the components of body, mind and spirit, which can be achieved through care and prevention of illness, rather than having to react to being unwell. Ayurveda therefore is seen as "preventive and promotive, elevating caring above curing" (Cheng-Tek Tai, 2012, p. 94). Furthermore, Tandon (2016) explains that it is not just the spiritual self but also the relationships with others that aid the wellbeing of a person. This could be linked to the importance of relationships as discussed in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), where relationships

between children, families, whānau and kaiako are central to providing and supporting a sense of wellbeing. However, in a sociocentric society as in India, relationships might be expressed differently than in a more egocentric world view practiced in Western countries. Interestingly, in India the responsibility for the wellbeing of a family is placed on the woman, and how well she performs in her role of mother and wife is a reflection of her own wellbeing and that of her family (Tandon, 2016). Some ways to promote wellbeing and health are praying, fasting, and creating harmony between the body, mind and spirit as well as within relationships with the family, community and wider society (Tandon, 2016).

Challenges for kaiako

With those challenges and wide range of notions of holism as discussed above in mind, how can kaiako support tamariki from a wide range of cultural backgrounds in a holistic manner? If holism can be understood to encompass the whole being, mind, body, and soul, kaiako need to be able to nourish those areas - with keeping the home culture, parental aspirations and ways of being and knowing in mind. Not a mean feat to be sure. Many kaiako in Aotearoa might be torn between their own understandings and interpretations of holistic development and learning and of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) and its application in practice. Overall, this might not be a bad starting point, as the curriculum expects kaiako to work with the community they serve, meaning that what is important, appropriate and seen as a holistic approach, will vary from centre to centre.

On the other hand, some kaiako might struggle as there seems to be a dichotomy between a holistic approach and modern ways of life and the fear that one approach means the exclusion of the other. However, in the multicultural society of Aotearoa, there is a place for a range of holisms and practices related to those. Bell et al. (2017) highlight that initial teacher education is “not the student collecting a bag of tricks and techniques” (p. 3) but should foster values and dispositions that enable kaiako to be open to different views, be prepared to learn and grow their knowledge and engage in communication with colleagues, families and children to ensure a holistic approach to education is offered, not only in theory but also in practice.

Just like education should be informed by a notion of holism, Arnott (2021) suggests that teachers need to reflect this as “practitioners must assume the position of critical reflector, carer, communicator, facilitator, observer, assessor and creator” (p. 1). Furthermore, Arnott (2021) acknowledges that “[E]arly Childhood must be known for its attention to holistic development, supporting the whole child, their families and their communities” (p. 1). It might also be timely to consider that only kaiako who feel a sense of holistic wellbeing for themselves can be responsive to the tamariki and whānau. To ensure that kaiako can role model as well as enjoy their own wellbeing, they need to be open to other perspectives, ensuring that the very diverse needs, aspirations, ways of being and knowing are not only met at the bare minimum, but actively promoted. Early childhood education services could ask themselves how kaiako from diverse cultural backgrounds work together to create a (w)holistic environment that appreciates, acknowledges and celebrates the diversities of all tamariki and whānau. A challenge for initial teacher education providers might be how to support such learning, when a lot of what can be considered a holistic approach is situated, steeped in culture and comes from the individual centre community.

The role of mentoring

One of the ways to prepare preservice teachers for the task of holistic teaching is effective mentoring. While of course a part of this responsibility has to lie with the education provider, an equally important part is played by the teachers that offer mentorship in the education settings in which the preservice teachers learn and practice. Ntshangase and Nkosi (2022) describe mentorship as a joint enterprise between the mentor and the mentee, in which the mentee can take guidance from the more experienced mentor, while the mentor, possibly challenged by the questions asked by the mentee, has the opportunity to grow further, while also increasing the understanding and teaching capacity of the mentee. As preservice teachers are placed in a range of early childhood education settings as part of their initial teacher education, a range of socioeconomic settings and maybe services with a range of cultural backgrounds can be experienced. Having those learning opportunities leads to an exploration of oneself as a teacher and what makes that self whole.

Drawing on the earlier discussed perspectives of holism, it could be fair to suggest that both mentor and mentee need to take a holistic stance in their engagement. Mentors need to be interested in the mentees - not just their teaching skills and pedagogical knowledge, but also in their values and beliefs and need to be open to share their own in equal measure. Tse, Abra and Tanaka (2017, p. 658) suggest the use of transformative inquiry for mentees as this “assists pre-service teachers in identifying, honouring, and strengthening their personal and unique teaching identities”, including their holistic wellbeing. The mentee might be able to share strategies on how to be unique, to be one holistic self, while supporting the holistic wellbeing of the tamariki in their care.

While this article highlights some of the many perspectives of holism, it is important to acknowledge that this article has not scope to explore wellbeing and holism in depth. However, the article does shed light that in a multicultural society, kaiako need to be open to a range of perspectives and understand that there are many interpretations of what a holistic approach might look like. While Aotearoa rightly celebrates *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) as their very own curriculum, there needs to be space for holism that reflects the families, tamariki and whānau of the centre community.

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