Everyday Spirituality: an aspect of the holistic curriculum in action

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ABSTRACT Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand includes different philosophical perspectives, may be part of the public or private sector and aims to be inclusive and holistic. The early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, supports these aims. Aspects of the curriculum that are holistic may be conceptualized in diverse ways and this qualitative research focused on the spiritual. Case studies were constructed in three different settings – a Montessori casa, a private preschool and a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten. This article concerns one of these settings and discusses the first day back at the Montessori casa after a two-week break. The concept of everyday spirituality is introduced and three narratives retell moments of everyday spirituality that occurred throughout the day. Three themes are addressed in some detail. The discussion is informed by Derrida’s notion of hospitality and by different perspectives about the role of spirituality in educational contexts.

Introduction
This article introduces the concept of everyday spirituality and the phrase implies an appreciation of aspects of daily life that are often taken for granted. Everyday spirituality recognises the extraordinary in the ordinary. Bruner (2004, p. 15) refers to Shklovsky’s concept ‘otstranenie “making the familiar strange”’ and proposes that this is a central feature of meaning making. While this device is used generally in literature, education and research (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995), it is proposed in this article to be a means of including the spiritual in the everyday life and pedagogical practices of early childhood settings.

This research proposes that spirituality has the power to introduce mystery and wonder into otherwise mundane events. Spirituality is a concept that resists definition: it means different things to different people. In the educational context it is linked to wisdom and compassion (J.P. Miller, 2002) and to experiences of wonder and joy. Parker Palmer (1998, p. 5) refers to spirituality as ‘the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life – a longing that animates love and work’. For many people, recognising the spiritual dimension is central to constructing a life worth living (Alexander, 2003). Spirituality may support feeling whole or complete and there are suggestions that it is a unifying or ‘connecting force’ (Baker, 2003, p. 51).

Conversely, spirituality is often seen as a source of division and is sometimes constructed as something to fear in secular societies. However, spirituality is not the same as fundamentalism or religious doctrine and spirituality as an integral part of the early childhood curriculum has the potential to connect not divide, hence the emphasis on whole/holistic. Many teachers and parents
said that what they feared in this research was the hidden agenda or proselytising and an unacknowledged religious bias. Perhaps shared understanding of what words like holistic and spiritual mean in particular educational contexts would make them less challenging. Many words may not be attractive or meaningful to everyone and Purpel & McLaurin (2004) note that it is important to use religious words and metaphors carefully and selectively. This is important in this research where the spiritual is not being directly linked to religion or to a single belief system.

This account is constructed from research that investigated the spiritual experiences of young children. It represents a preliminary exploration of the idea that spirituality permeates everyday life and pedagogical practices. An understanding of everyday spirituality recognises the possibility that the day-to-day experiences of children may be spiritual (Halford, 1998/9; Bone, 2005a). Case studies were set up in a Montessori casa, a private preschool and a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten. Certain themes emerged as part of the case-study analysis and this article presents findings in relation to the Montessori casa. Following this, the discussion draws on the work of Derrida and explores the notion of hospitality as a spiritual concept. In early childhood contexts it has been acknowledged that Derrida’s work ‘obliges a re-examination of the familiar’ (Jones, 2002, p. 140).

**Curriculum and Context**

In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand spirituality is closely linked to notions of well-being and belonging. This is recognised in the curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). An influential voice behind the construction of this bicultural curriculum is that of Tilly Reedy (1995), who speaks of her understanding of key concepts from her ‘own life and deep understanding of the Māori world view’ (Reedy, 2003, p. 51). She includes the wairua (spirituality) in her discussion of an inclusive and holistic curriculum. Reedy (2003, p. 68) refers to children as ‘a divine spark’ and she acknowledges the sacred aspect of teaching young children.

Woven into the early childhood curriculum are the guiding principles of holistic development/kotahitanga, empowerment/whakamana, family and community/whānau tangata and relationships/ngā hononga (Ministry of Education, 1996). The curriculum document states that the hope of the early childhood community is for children to be supported in ‘mind, body and spirit’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). It requires that the spiritual dimension be acknowledged and that ‘adults should recognise the important place of spirituality in the development of the whole child, particularly for Māori and Tagata Pasifika families’ (p. 47). The concept of the whole child links to holistic understandings and Cullen (2003, p. 279) notes that ‘a key principle of *Te Whāriki* is that it reflects the holistic way in which children learn and grow’.

*Te Whāriki* is enacted against a background of sociocultural theory that emphasises language, culture, context and participation in community (Anning et al, 2004). This theoretical perspective supports ‘close involvement with everyday life’ (Rogoff, 2003, p. 13). In terms of this study it meant looking at social practices that are often the ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of the education of young children. Spirituality can be limited to something that happens to the individual, an inner process, a ‘self-enclosed, privatized vision of the spiritual life’ (Hay, 2000, p. 39). The themes explored in this research emphasise the spiritual as it happens between people in relationship to each other and as it emerges in the practices that construct everyday life and culture in early childhood settings.

This research recognises the spiritual dimension as inextricably entwined with culture (Pere, 1982/1994; Myers, 1997; Smith, 1999; Tisdell, 2003). It acknowledges a way of knowing about spirituality enriched by the cultural background and present influences on the researcher. Taking a position in the research meant reflecting on what spirituality might look like from a Pākehā rather than Māori viewpoint and a European background supported an exploration of the work of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner in relation to spirituality. However, life and work is continually informed and inspired by Māori concepts and educational research (Pere, 1982/1994, 1991; Tangaere, 1997; Smith, 1999). Early childhood contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand reflect indigenous influences and perspectives from elsewhere. Valuing personal experience and diverse philosophies presented opportunities to appreciate the networking and border crossings that inform early childhood research (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).
Montessori and Spirituality

This particular article focuses on experience in a Montessori casa. The word casa reflects the Italian background of Maria Montessori (1870-1952), whose first school for young children in Rome was called the Casa dei Bambini, or Children’s House. Montessori wrote extensively about the child as a ‘spiritual embryo’ (Montessori, 1988, p. 55). This phrase implies both that the growing child is spiritual and that spirituality can be conceptualized as developing in an orderly way given the right conditions. She was clear that her educational methods were designed to support the ‘inner life’ (Montessori, 1967, p. 40).

One of Montessori’s key contributions to early childhood education was her emphasis on the prepared environment, and in Montessorian terms the environment itself provides ‘stairs for the spirit’ (Standing, 1998, p. 279). She noted that: ‘Adults admire their environment; they can remember it, and think about it; but the child absorbs it. The things he [sic] sees are not just remembered; they form part of his soul. He incarnates in himself all in the world about him that his eyes see and his ears hear’ (Montessori, 1988, p. 56).

Many people think that the Montessori system concentrates exclusively on the cognitive, but Montessori herself was concerned with every detail that concerned the life of the children and their families who came to the Casa dei Bambini. She also commented on the ‘spiritual influence’ (Montessori, 1967, p. 321) of the Children’s House on people who visited the school.

While Maria Montessori had a Catholic background, the methods she used explored the cosmos and the natural world. She was passionate about science, was innovative and challenged convention in her own life and work (Standing, 1998). Montessori engaged with the physical, intellectual and moral aspects of education that she described as its joy and was quite transparent about emphasising ‘the life of the spirit’ (Montessori, 1967, p. 320). Her work influenced others and Standing (1998, p. 34) records that a teacher who heard Montessori lecture in Rome commented, ‘We do not understand all that she is trying to teach us; but we are all finding it a spiritual stimulus.’ Her writing communicates the same sense of spiritual stimulation. When researching spirituality, it seemed logical to explore some of the educational philosophers who, like Maria Montessori, so deliberately and determinedly included spirituality in their educational writings concerning young children.

Methodology in Action

While recognising that spirituality is an abstract and elusive concept, it seemed that by constructing qualitative case studies and involving people in specific settings that different experiences, opinions and perspectives about spirituality would emerge. The qualitative approach taken in this research acknowledges subjectivity and involvement in the interpretive process. In this study the early childhood setting is the ‘interpretive community’ (Denzin, 2001, p. 7) and as many people as possible from each setting were included in each case study. Taking a participant observer role in each setting for two days a week for one term (10 weeks) made it possible for the researcher (Jane) to focus on the experiences of children. Teachers were interviewed about the influence of spirituality on their practice and philosophy. An important part of the research design was that apart from taking photographs teachers were given the video camera and asked to make a video about what they thought spirituality might look like in their particular setting. Parents were invited to two focus groups. The first focus group discussed their beliefs about spirituality in relation to education and young children. The second focus group was when the visual data were presented and the video made in that setting was viewed.

This research involved young children, and the methodological approach affirmed children as capable and aware of what is going on around them. Children are ‘social beings who are trying to participate in and make sense of their world’ (Aubrey et al, 2000, p. 26). They were given their own consent forms and invited to be involved in the research (Bone, 2005b), as were teachers and parents. It was important to attend meetings and to meet teachers and parents in order to begin to build trust. Parents and teachers needed reassurance that there was no hidden agenda or religious persuasion and we discussed the different perspectives we had about spirituality. The research acted as an impetus to explore what spirituality meant to everyone in each setting, ‘everyone’ being the children who are aged between three and six years, their parents and teachers and Jane, the
researcher. It was essential to recognise spirituality as a personal and sensitive area of inquiry (Renzetti & Lee, 1993).

Each case study forms a new narrative, a text that can be read for many reasons. One possibility is that readers may find that something resonates with their own beliefs and practices. Certain aspects of the study may be relevant in different settings. In terms of case study there is an emphasis not so much on generalisability but rather on the opportunity for rich description that is ‘explicitly located’ (van Maanen, 1999, p. 28). This is definitely true of case studies in early childhood contexts where each setting is unique and complex.

In the Montessori casa it first became possible to notice the potential of everyday events to reveal the spiritual dimension. This setting is also interesting because it offers a fresh perspective on ways to support spiritual experience. The private preschool and Steiner kindergarten offered their own way of looking at the spiritual in their particular settings. Because of the qualitative case-study approach with an emphasis on co-construction, each case was necessarily different (Wells et al, 2002). A strong sense of exploring together predominated in the Montessori casa. As the place of the spiritual in the everyday pedagogical practices of the casa began to be articulated it became obvious in this environment that the spiritual influenced what went on but was often called something else. In this setting the process of articulating and naming what was spiritual was shared and personal beliefs began to overlap with professional considerations.

Writing about each case study gives the opportunity to relive the spiritual moment. Van Manen (2002, p. 7) refers to fragments interpreted and reconstructed from experience as ‘phenomenological reflections’. The story of research experience in each setting is told in relation to themes that emerged. Each theme is a consequence of the analysis of lived experience in these settings (van Manen, 1990). The focus was the spiritual within a holistic framework and interpretations were based on this. The origin of the word spirituality is from spirare – the breath of life. In the narrative representation of events in this setting an attempt is made to make this breath visible, available, something that can be shared because it is ‘always already’ present. The ephemeral breath of spirituality is resistant to capture but it becomes the focus of these narratives.

The narrative voice in the following three pieces is that of Jane, the researcher. These narratives were written as part of the analytic process. She recorded field notes and conversations with parents and teachers and with children. Sometimes these impressions were supported by evidence from the visual data. After being shared they were revised and rewritten as part of the initial meaning-making process. Writing is itself an iterative process of change and revision. The text is then revealed to readers for fresh interpretations. This work is influenced by de Certeau’s (1988) investigations of the everyday. He proposes that through narrative it is possible to do more than describe, saying that narrative does not merely describe or ‘tell about’ a practice or movement but ‘it makes it’ (his italics) (de Certeau, 1988, 81). The narratives reproduced here represent ‘the interplay of construction and interpretation of experiences’ (Flick, 2002, p. 34).

The Montessori Casa

The Montessori casa has 52 children on the roll and approximately 20 children attend each session. The day is from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. for most children, although some of the three-year-olds go home at 12 noon. The casa is located in a semi-rural small town in Aotearoa New Zealand. The town has a predominantly Māori/Pākehā population and this community is reflected in the casa. Teachers and parents value the Montessori perspective. This was the first day in the role of researcher and the impressions made that first day upheld Goffman’s assertion that ‘the first day you’ll see more than you’ll ever see again’ (cited in Travers, 2001, p. 36). It was the first day back in the casa after a two-week break for the children and teachers. That first day certainly gave an opportunity to compare researcher experience with the experiences of new children and those returning from the holiday. Events in that particular setting were not so familiar that they were taken for granted and preconceptions were challenged.

On the surface the following three incidents are everyday occurrences in early childhood settings: being welcomed, listening and showing caring behaviours. However, in relation to the concept of everyday spirituality they demonstrate the spiritual possibilities always present in what
is happening in the daily life of a busy early childhood setting. Ordinary routines and rituals begin to take on a different feeling when they are imbued with the spiritual.

Welcome

When they arrive parents and children walk down the path which is quite dark and leafy. They then enter a clean and shining workspace. But first the children negotiate the process of leaving their parents in the entranceway. The entranceway, with its photographs of children, space for bags and a noticeboard that features information about the research, forms a liminal space, the betwixt/between space for saying goodbye to parents before joining friends and teachers. A liminal space (Turner, 1969) is a ritual space. There is a discernible pattern and it is clear that the children know what to do. A teacher welcomes everyone but parents do not leave the entranceway, so children cross the threshold alone. They enter their workspace and are greeted by friends and teachers. Welcoming is a bridge between inside/outside and has the potential to affirm the sacred nature of meeting and recognition.

The environment is itself welcoming. Everything is in its place and seems to be waiting for the children to animate it. Tables are clear and surrounded by shelves full of materials. Sunlight is diffused through gauze curtains and leafy plants. It is quiet because shoes are removed at the door and everyone wears slippers or has bare feet. I notice that as a stranger I often walk on the carpet but the children put me right; the carpeted areas are the workspaces, the places to sit with their chosen equipment if they do not wish to sit at a table. Children returning to the casa know where to find materials and go to their favourite places. They show their preference for teachers who they have a close relationship with, for their friends, and for special activities. The sense of order in the casa is a reflection of Montessori’s (1967, p. 83) desire to engage children in an ordered environment as ‘the highest form of work’.

Two children go straight to sit at the kai (food) table that is always laid with a check cloth and has crackers, apples, cheese. They sit and talk. They notice a tapestry picture of the Montessori casa on the wall next to them and one of the children strokes the picture with her hand and says ‘Montessori’ and laughs with her friend. This sense of belonging acknowledges a spiritual connection with place.

During the day Kirsty, one of the four-year-old children, shows that she knows about being welcomed and about welcoming others into this setting. Jill, a teacher, and Kirsty are obviously very pleased to see each other. Someone chooses to take a photo of them on that first morning back. Jill’s eyes shine as she holds hands with Kirsty and their heads are together while they smile at the camera. Their strong bond makes an impression on people who see them together. Later that same morning I am made welcome by Kirsty. At mat time before lunch there are songs and a story. When sitting with the children I suddenly feel my hand being held and I realise that Kirsty has reached out to welcome me.

I am aware of the smallness and softness of Kirsty’s hand and through the language of touch I am welcomed into her world. A sense of being chosen is communicated through touch. It is an invitation to be close and to feel affection. Another teacher, Helen, walks past and says, ‘A spiritual moment?’ and smiles. This is the beginning of welcoming the spiritual moment in the casa. It is part of everyday spirituality to be aware in the moment of the moment. Such moments are often fleeting and even as they are recognised they are fading. We become conscious that it is possible to share these times and the spiritual moment becomes something we can talk about. I am relieved that such moments do not exist only in my imagination but somehow we share them and this affirms the potential of the research to share what happens beyond the lived experience itself.

It is an expected practice in the casa that after being in a particular area or using materials that they are then ‘made beautiful’ in order to welcome the next person. Welcoming happened throughout the day as the daily routines unfolded. Lily, who is nearly five, asks if she can help look after the children who are staying to lunch for the first time. She knows that being made welcome is important. The spirit is lifted and reenergised in this place. A final note reads that it is a day of laughter.
Everyday Spirituality

Listening

The *casa* is peaceful. It is a place where listening is privileged and the amount of extraneous noise that might interfere with this is minimal. The Montessori method recognised the importance of a calm environment. Teachers are at ease with silence and quiet. They recognise that in peaceful moments it is possible to listen to others and to oneself. In this environment the silence, the space between sound and activity, is significant. Listening and being listened to is accepted pedagogical practice and listening is engaged informally in the usual interactions. It is also, as in this instance, encouraged in a more structured way.

The Talking Stick

The children sit in a circle. Fipe, a teacher, reminds them of the rules that guide the use of the ‘talking stick’. Each child has a turn and when holding the stick they are invited to talk about their holiday. Fipe always responds, comments, shares, and everyone is encouraged to listen. In this structured, sequential and formal activity the children are aware that their stories and anecdotes are valued. In terms of focusing attention the talking stick is effective and is part of the magic of being in the circle that all the children find irresistible. Once in the circle everyone is included and everyone’s turn is respected. Fipe speaks quietly, is very calm and the children begin to listen to each other. She sits on the floor so there is no difference in level and she shares the experience. This is an equitable practice. The spiritual quality of listening is demonstrated when we attend to each other as human beings who are worthy of whole-hearted attention.

The Silence Game

Afterwards everyone listens to the silence. Fipe asks the children to ‘feel the quiet’ and she invites the children to ‘make silence’. The children know what to do, they sit quietly and watch sand fall through an egg timer. The spiritual nature of the teacher is something that is felt in the room at moments like this. Fipe communicates tranquillity and these are spiritual moments. This silence is restorative and a sense of peace fills the room. Collective silence is a powerful experience. Afterwards when the children’s names are whispered they go to their chosen activity like arrows. One of the children tells me that what she wanted to do was already in her mind. Obviously the silence gives time to focus, time for self discovery, to listen to the self. This ‘silence game’ is a manifestation of the Montessori spirit (Montessori, 1967, p. 142).

Later in the afternoon some children are at the food table and spill the full water jug. They call out, ‘We’ve had an accident.’ One of the teachers mops up and changes the cloth. As it floats onto the table Sammy laughs and says, ‘Pretty magic!’ The three girls look delighted. The food goes back on the table and they continue to eat and talk to each other. The whole incident takes place without a word spoken by the teacher, who just smiles and moves away once she has dealt with the spill. Silence can sometimes be felt as a spiritual gift.

Courtesy or Care of the Other

The word courtesy is part of the Montessori discourse. From this philosophical perspective certain practical exercises require children to learn about courtesy through attention to everyday tasks. In this context the teachers prefer to call it ‘care of the other’. The teachers say that the practice of courtesy or care for others is lived in the relationships between everyone involved with the school. The spiritual dimension can be revealed in the ability to feel regard for others, to forget the self and to embrace a sense of oneness. Leo, who is nearly five, has become the big-brother figure to Rea, one of the younger girls, who is not confident on this first day back. She has been his shadow today. In this role he shows his acceptance of tuakana/teina (older/younger sibling) relationships.

Rea – tugs Leo’s arm and points to the platform. ‘Can we go up there?’
Leo – sighs, turns and says to me ‘I knew this was going to happen.’
(He does not let Rea hear and I am surprised by the depth of his sigh and the way his body suddenly droops).
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Jane – ‘Does she like to play with you?’
Leo – nods and goes off with Rea.

He settles her on the platform and after a while returns to his painting.

Leo displays tact and his kind heart in his unwillingness to hurt Rea’s feelings even at inconvenience to himself. He does not allow her to hear what he says to me and goes off with slight resignation but still with what is called ‘good grace’ – he realises that this is a big moment for her as she is still settling at the school. He is now a big brother at home and was waiting to tell his teachers this morning about the new baby. Our knowledge of the ‘whole’ story for each child can help make sense of their reactions and behaviours. In his reaction to Rea’s request Leo also challenged the positive spin that is always put on ‘scaffolding’ and made me reflect that from the perspective of the older peer it may sometimes be a burden to be the support person for others. However, in fulfilling his responsibility Leo allows me to witness the spiritual act of putting someone else first.

Earlier that morning Leo had experienced someone caring for him. The children rushed outside to watch a house being moved onto a site next door. There was a lot of big machinery and they got chairs so that they could sit down and watch. Leo got up and Kirsty said, ‘I will keep your chair for you.’ She sat down and when he returned she got up so that he could sit down again. In a culture that promotes courtesy and care of the other everyone lives up to the expectations of that setting. In the casa, care of the other becomes a series of spiritual acts.

Discussion

The day in a busy early childhood setting is made up of routines that divide time and create space between one activity and the next. On this particular day it became clear that while spirituality may be recognised as a private, mystical experience, it is also something that permeates everyday interactions and relationships. Spirituality may illuminate diverse aspects of everyday life. It is proposed that the notion of hospitality (Pere, 1982/1994; Myers, 1997; Derrida, 2002; Bennett, 2003) may be a useful concept to consider in relation to emergent themes in the casa that connect to the spiritual dimension. It is a concept that may be more accessible if spirituality does not attract. Derrida (2002, 366) says that the practice of hospitality can be a ‘spiritual adventure’. To be hospitable means to welcome strangers, to be friendly and generous, to entertain, and there is a link to the idea of plenty. It is possible to convey to the stranger that there is unlimited good in the place where they find themselves and that they have arrived at the right place, a safe place, a place that is friendly and a place to replenish and reenergise the spirit.

The Māori concept manaaki is defined by Pere (1982/1994, p. 72) as meaning ‘to show respect or kindness to; to give hospitality, or to bestow’. She says that it is completely unconnected to material wealth and is about ‘the finer qualities of people’ and children must learn about the concept of manaaki in order not to cause offence to others. It is not something that can be taken for granted. In the Montessori casa such learning is intentional. Children welcome, listen, and care for each other because in this environment certain expectations realise Montessori’s vision of ‘awakening the divine forces within every person’s soul’ (R. Miller, 2002, p. 232).

In the metaphorical sense to be hospitable may also mean to share ideas, to connect, to make meaning together. The word itself includes a sense of reciprocity. The Latin word hospes means both guest and host – it opens up the possibility of taking both roles, of being teacher and learner and being open to ideas and new roles. Leo shows understanding of his role as unofficial ‘host’. He accepts the role of tuakana or older sibling; this creates a feeling of family or whanaungatanga; obligations towards self and other are acknowledged. These relational acts are ‘the essence of love and care for one another’ according to Tangaere (1997, p. 50). In these moments there is a spiritual connection to Buber’s ‘I and thou’, described by Yoshida (2002, p. 128) as ‘the holistic, direct, mutual relationship with no subject/object separation’.

Incidents of mutual recognition can be supported in the everyday rituals of the early childhood setting. Turner (1969) describes the liminal space where this happens: a place where distinctions between self/other, sacred/profane, and host/guest become blurred. This spiritually in-between space constitutes a place of transition and gives an opportunity for transformation. This space was constructed by the rituals of welcoming, during circle time, by silence and in the
moment of Leo’s struggle. A setting that is hospitable to the spirit will accentuate the liminal potential of time and space; it will value the in-between.

Derrida (2001, p. 102) discusses the hospitable moment as a ‘gift’ and a demonstration of unconditional regard for the other. He suggests that hospitality may refer to crossing borders but ‘also has a role in ordinary life: when someone arrives, when love arrives, for example, one takes a risk, one is exposed’ (Derrida & Roudinesco, 2004, p. 60). This could be a description of the pedagogical moment as a manifestation of spiritual practice. This is the moment when Fipe shares with the children the gift of peace, the ability to be silent and to reconnect with the self. It is the moment when Jill takes time to greet Kirsty with joy and affection. In such moments of everyday spirituality Palmer’s (1998, p. 50) affirmation that ‘good teaching is an act of hospitality toward the young’ is experienced in the casa.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Bennett (2003, p. xiv) proposes certain spiritual practices that connect with hospitality in educational contexts. He proposes that it might be fruitful in educational settings to explore the following aspects: attending to the other, seeking self-knowledge and the practice of asceticism. In the narratives presented here, attending to the other is embedded in the processes of welcoming, listening and care for others. Seeking self-knowledge is supported in an environment that encourages freedom of choice and provides the time and space for concentration. The practice of asceticism is realised in controlled language or in silence. According to Bennett (2003, p. 80), this practice also means having the ability to ‘offer the kind word’ and this is noticeable in the interactions of children and teachers. Withholding the sharp word and making opportunities for caring in the encounters that take place throughout the day recognises the spirit of the child as worthy of respect and attention. This is different from standard ‘teacher talk’ and the automatic question-and-response mode that sometimes become second nature in busy early childhood environments.

Parker Palmer (1998) affirms that through community a sense of the spiritual can be recognised that is respectful and that informs education. He says that ‘the health of education depends on our ability to hold sacred and secular together so that they can correct and enrich each other’ (Palmer, 1998, p. 111). The secular nature of education in Aotearoa New Zealand and in many western countries makes the holistic curriculum less possible unless an idea of the spiritual can be engaged that is inclusive, pluralistic and non-threatening. Reedy (2003, p. 51) requested the early childhood community ‘to develop and implement curricula that enhance the lives of all children’ (her italics). The practices that I observed and describe as spiritual in this case study are in this category. They open up the possibility that spirituality may be found everywhere and in everything. This is simply another way of looking at the world; another way of connecting. Such practices support holistic aspects of the curriculum, the inclusion of spirituality and the recognition of the whole child in context. To affirm wholeness challenges practice that alienates and fragments.

The holistic aspect of the curriculum can take many forms and spirituality may be engaged in different ways. Iannone & Obenauf (1999) propose that attention to spirituality in the curriculum may involve risk-taking, an awareness of the world and a willingness to be changed. In this sense practices that remain open and welcoming to difference, whether of people, culture, ideas or beliefs, become essential in terms of sharing spiritual understandings and becoming transformative. Very often children and families enter environments that are already set in their ways and only recognise their own ways of doing things. It might be fruitful to ask whether there are opportunities for change in certain early childhood contexts and whether there is freedom to ask questions and to critique the status quo. In many early childhood settings the world is coming through the door. Fleer (2003) suggests that in early childhood contexts ‘we only allow newcomers in when they have mastered the language and have understood the codes of practice’ (p. 65) and wonders if it is timely to be critical of exclusion in any form. Dahlberg & Moss (2005, p. 95) propose a pedagogy ‘where we examine the question of being together’, and this might be particularly relevant in terms of spirituality.

Dahlberg & Moss (2005, p. 182) describe a Utopian vision for early childhood settings. This implies a secular vision, although they constantly affirm connection, networking and relationships,
‘new perspectives, different ways of thinking, alternative possibilities’. Others may see in early childhood settings an opportunity to reconstruct paradise, a return to the garden, a version of heaven on earth (Paley, 1999). Writing from the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the inclusion of spirituality affirms the Māori concept of mauri: the animating lifeforce in all things (Pere, 1991). Mauri can be envisaged as permeating the practices that construct everyday life. It can be argued that any vision that includes indigenous worldviews will encompass the spiritual. Excluding the spiritual may be a means of marginalisation. For many people, education that does not include the spiritual dimension is incomplete and can never reflect the whole person. For others, recognition of the spiritual remains controversial. Finding harmony is always challenging. This article proposes that acknowledging spirituality through an appreciation of everyday life might be a way to bridge difference by simply sharing the ordinary wonder of daily existence.

The energy of the Montessori casa seemed to foster the potential for ‘spiritual joys’ (Montessori, 1967, p. 140). Montessori herself always recommended a practical approach to education in order to support ‘inner sensitivity’ and to encourage a ‘spiritual sense’ (Montessori, 1967, p. 298). The casa supports an educational experience that respects children, that allows their relationships to flourish and that has unique rites and rituals; teachers are clear that practices in the casa reflect their collective interpretation of Montessori’s educational philosophy. Following a specific philosophy requires others to show a hospitable spirit towards different ways of doing things. Different environments support diversity and a range of ways to find out more about ‘the great unknown that is everyday life’ (Mayol, 1998, p. 9), and this may be especially true with regard to the spiritual.

**Everyday Spirituality**

Very often the inclusion of spirituality in early childhood education is seen as a question of recognising festivals, accommodating different religious beliefs or doing something special on birthdays. Often the spotlight is on difference. The concept of everyday spirituality challenges this perspective and this article proposes that recognition of the spiritual in everyday life is equitable and inclusive practice. To re-cognise is to know again, to see simple actions in a new way. To re-cognise the spiritual in early childhood settings supports well-being in the practice of a holistic approach to education. To re-cognise the spiritual in everyday life is not to detract from the mysterious and elusive nature of spirituality. Everyday spirituality has the power to transform day-to-day activity in early childhood educational settings.

**Conclusion**

In the Montessori casa, even on the first day, it became possible to see the spiritual in many aspects of everyday life in that setting. Because of this experience deeper understandings of the holistic curriculum were realised and continue to be explored in this research. This article focuses on a very small aspect of the research, but in the telling and retelling of these incidents the merging of the spiritual with the everyday makes the pedagogical possibility of spirituality more accessible. The themes that emerge from this study are everyday themes and incidents that happen in all early childhood settings. The philosophy of the Montessori casa brings a different perspective to this exploration of the spiritual.

In the discussion spirituality is joined with the concept of hospitality to add another dimension to these spiritual moments. Scott (2001, p. 121) makes the point that there are often ‘difficulties in both telling and listening to stories of spiritual experience’. Perhaps sharing these spiritual moments is risky but it is motivated by the hope that acknowledging everyday spirituality may support holistic educational practice.

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Note
[1] This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, PN Protocol 02/146. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this project, please contact Professor Sylvia V. Rumball, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Palmerston North, telephone (06) 350 5249 (s.v.rumball@massey.ac.nz).

References


