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**Spirituality in early childhood education**

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Spirituality is an important dimension of the holistic development of young children, much like autonomy, resilience and responsibility. Unfortunately, it often remains as a forgotten area in early childhood education in many cultures (Zhang, 2012). Many people simply could not articulate the concept of spirituality concretely and some may confuse it with religion. Sokanovic and Muller (1999) pointed out that the definition of the term *spirituality* has little consensus of opinion throughout society, and has even, in specialised fields such as education, academia and religion sectors, various definitions. To explore the specific meaning of *spirituality* would be not only meaningful but of great significance for our understanding of the tenet of early childhood education and the national curriculum of New Zealand, *Te Whāriki*. Furthermore, spirituality is also a frequently discussed topic in many philosophies of early childhood education. For example, spiritual self or inner spirituality is recognised by Froebel and Pestalozzi (Froebel Web, 2014; Bruehlmeier, 2014), while spiritual development is further explored and integrated in teaching practices by Montessori and Steiner (Weinberg, 2009; Ullrich, 1994). Therefore, the task of this article is to try to define the term “spirituality” in the context of early childhood education, and explore spirituality as presented in the work of two early childhood theorists. Later, this article will also critically examine the aspect of spirituality in my own childhood education in China, and in relation to other contexts.

When looking into the definition of spirituality, although many attempts have been made in the literature (see, for example, Sokanovic & Muller, 1999; King, 2013), no consensus has been reached yet. It remains unclear and incongruent amongst many theorists and philosophers. For example, Bennett (as cited in Sokanovic & Muller, 1999) sees spirituality as “referring to an intangible and almost incommunicable part of our experience… concerned with content rather than form.” For Fowler (as cited in Sokanovic & Muller, 1999), it has to do with “the quality of human living - serenity, courage, loyalty, device and quiet confidence that enables one to feel at home in the universe,” whereas Bloemhard (as cited in Stoyles, Stanford, Caputi, Keating, & Hyde, 2012) claims,

">[t]o be human is to be spiritual, and to be in touch with one’s spirituality involves cultivating an openness of mind; a willingness to know; the courage to live with the mystery and the intention to embrace life fully. To be spiritual is to be inclusive it is about stillness, practice and being, yet it is also about action in the world, about learning and sharing. (p. 203)
Sokanovic and Muller (1999) combined the most important and common elements distilled from various literature sources and formed the following definition used in the study, which I found most relevant to our study in early childhood education:

That part of our inner being through which we experience the interactions of our values, emotions and beliefs with each other and their relationship to a divine being or the inner I. Through these interactions and relationships we make dynamic responses to life perceived by the outside world by such attributes as enthusiasm, creativity, imagination, pride, individuality, uniqueness and curiosity. (p. 9)

To properly understand the definition of spirituality, it would certainly help to draw a clear distinction between spirituality and religion. In reality, the reference of either term would often remind people of the other. However, both the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (OFSTED) and the National Curriculum Council issued papers declaring that spiritual was not synonymous with religion (Sokanovic & Muller, 1999). They are two different concepts. Philips (2003, as cited in Zhang, 2012) stated that religion is “an extrinsic organised faith system grounded in institutional standards, practices, and core beliefs, while spirituality is intrinsic personal beliefs and practices that can be experienced within or without formal religion” (p. 40). Alexander and McLaughlin (2003, as cited in Zhang, 2012) further split spirituality into two broad categories: “a religiously tethered conception of spirituality,” and “a religiously untethered conception of spirituality” (p. 40), with the former one related to religion and the latter one concerned with one’s own spirit or soul. Here, we can clearly see that spirituality is broader than religion, as spirituality is inclusive of one’s entire inner world while religion is a mental worship or worship practice of one’s religious belief.

Nowadays, there is a growing awareness of the importance of spirituality for the whole life of human beings (Zhang, 2012). Many deem spirituality as an “inherent property” of human beings (p. 39). The link between spirituality and the quality of a holistic life in terms of emotional soundness, physical well-being, relationships, social interaction and connectedness are increasingly recognised (for example, Johnstone, Glass, & Oliver 2007, as cited in Zhang 2012). According to Zhang, the World Health Organisation recognises spirituality as where “self-wholeness and stability” comes from (Boero et al., 2005, as cited in Zhang 2012). King (2013) believes that, for human beings, spirituality means equally to breath and blood for the body. It is “a cry for life” (Aquino 1993, as cited in King, 2013) and a “zest for life” (King, 2013, p. 12). For children, the development of their spiritual potential, helps them discover “fullness – plenitude – throughout their life” (King, 2013, p. 14). This, in turn, will “empower them to deal creatively with an open future, nurture a zest and love for life and experience themselves as a deeply connected, integral part of the great community of life” (p. 14).

Keeping this exploration of the meaning and importance of spirituality in mind will help to better appreciate the advancements made in philosophies of, for example, Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori, and their corresponding teaching practices in early childhood education. Viewing from the lens of spirituality, Steiner and Montessori’s theories place the most importance on the
dimension of spiritual development in early childhood education, compared to other theorists. Both Steiner and Montessori lay their foundation of childhood education on human spiritual development. Specifically, as Ullrich (1994) contends, “[t]he central theme of Steiner’s work is the inner perception of the spiritual world and the spiritualisation of every area of human activities” (p. 1). Similarly, Oberski (2011) believes that the explicit recognition of the fundamental spirituality of human beings in nature is the foundation of Steiner-Waldorf (SW) education. Steiner claims that there exists one single primeval spiritual foundation from which the universe and mankind originate, and the spiritual nucleus from the spiritual worlds that each individual has unites the physical and mental forms (Ullrich, 1994). According to Ullrich (1994), Steiner’s cosmic spiritualistic anthropology is the entire foundation of his educational philosophy, which builds on two cornerstones, the concept of development and personality. Steiner believes that the growth or development of the child or adolescent follows the cosmic rhythm of seven year periods, which resembles a process of reincarnation, which is the law of spiritual worlds, connecting the macrocosm and the microcosm (Ullrich, 1994). As Ullrich (1994) describes, personality or the unique character of an individual human being is defined by Galen: melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric and sanguine, four temperaments representing an entire total “psycho-physical type psychologically recognised by the kinds of stimuli to which the individual is most receptive and physically by the shape of the body” (p. 5). According to Ullrich (1994), Steiner believes that, during the process of reincarnation or growth, four cosmic forces, namely physical, ethereal, astral and spiritual, would shape a particular temperament. Therefore, “[e]ducation becomes an aid to incarnation, to assist and harmonize the growth of the spiritual being into its physical form determined by genetic and moral factors and defined by karma even before the act of birth itself” (p. 4), and its “important task … [is] to harmonise and balance out the biased tendencies of the temperament” (p. 5). In Steiner’s opinion, teachers or educators could be gardeners who mould others, or priests to lead others’ souls, or masters of healing art (Ullrich, 1994).

As for Montessori, she “pursued her educational work with a spiritual consciousness verging on mysticism” (Miller, 2004, p. 14). She sees children with God in them, and they have power in them ever since they are born, as she observed that,

The child strives to assimilate his environment and from such efforts springs the deep-seated unity of his personality. This prolonged and gradual labour is a continual process through which the spirit enters into portion of its instrument…[Hence] the unceasing labor of spiritual incarnation. Thus the human personality forms itself by itself, like the embryo, and the child becomes the creator of the man, the father of the man. (Montessori, 1985, as cited in Weinberg, 2009, p. 32)

Montessori believes that, rather than being simply a biological or psychological entity, the growing human being is “a spiritual entity seeking expression in the form of a human body within the physical and cultural world” (Miller, 2004, p. 14). Montessori further emphasises that “[t]he real danger threatening humanity is the emptiness in men’s souls; all the rest is merely a consequence of this emptiness” (Montessori 1972a, as cited in Miller, 2004, p. 17). She understands education not in the sense of teaching, but of assisting children’s spiritual
development (Weinberg, 2009) and regards it as “not simply a biological or pedagogical responsibility, but a profound spiritual task” (Miller, 2004, p. 18), which “must follow the universal laws of human development as these are revealed in the lives of actual children” (p. 15), rather than endeavour to attain social aims by forcing adult ideals on young people. She claims that “education is the process of awakening the divine formative forces within every person’s soul that enable the individual to make his or her own unique contribution to the cosmic plan, to fulfil his or her own destiny” (p. 17), and therefore she envisioned a curriculum called “cosmic education”. Her approach is aimed to form in young people an “expansive, inspiring vision of the grandeur of the universe and one’s personal destiny within it” and gives them wholesome life meaning “because all aspects of creation are shown to fit into a complex, interconnected whole that is far larger than our customary limited worldview” (Miller, 2004, p. 17). Wolf (1996, as cited in Miller, 2004) comments that:

the value of cosmic education… is that it places the child’s life in a spiritual perspective. No one can be confronted with the cosmic miracle and not see that there is more to life than our everyday experiences. Fast foods, designer sneakers, video games and sports heroes all pale beside the wonder of the universe. (p. 17)

Similar to Steiner, the war experience influenced Montessori’s philosophy greatly as she also focuses on bringing peace into the world through education. By shaping a broader or more grand vision of the world in the young generation through education, which Miller (2004) understands as “spiritual reconstruction” (p. 17), “rather than any superficial economic of political effort,” Montessori attempts to avoid violence like wars in the world forever.

Although both Steiner and Montessori’s theories have similar spiritual foundations in early childhood education, there are differences in many specific aspects. Their missions, approaches and practices of education are quite different. First of all, while Steiner pursued to revive the spiritual imaginations of children whose heart and mind he believed to be hardened excessively by the war, Montessori worked to cure and normalise children who resorted to excessive imagination to escape from the reality they could not fit into, and tried to balance their imagined world and practical one (Coulter, 2003). Correspondingly, Montessori’s method applies concrete concepts, such as materials, environment, play exercise and practicality to describe and construct a concrete world in the children’s minds and bring them to understand and appreciate the real world, whereas Steiner voices abstract concepts, such as essence, rhythm, feeling elements, and beauty to help children learn about their inner spiritual world (Coulter, 2003). Thirdly, according to Coulter (2003), when Montessori advocated the spiritual embryo of the child and the spiritual preparation of the teacher, Steiner requires teachers to be experienced in life so as to model children’s ways in the world conversely. Finally, the two approaches have opposite circular elements, as well (Coulter, 2003). As Coulter (2003) finds, Montessori’s idea is to first introduce to children forms that manifest the greatest mathematicians’ ideas, such as Platonic solids and Pythagorean geometric forms and later the ideas underline, while Steiner would first introduce number principles, biographies and spiritual quests of mathematicians at that time, before the introduction of forms.
Reflecting upon my own childhood, the disappointing thing is that spiritual development is generally neglected in some countries, like China, and individual spiritual nurturing remained almost blank in my own childhood. Little attention was paid by the society as a whole to the healthy spiritual dimension of holistic development of the child. From the historical perspective, the reason may lie in the revolutionary change that happened in China. Ever since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party professed atheism under the guidance of Marxist-Leninist theory, criticising religious belief as opiate of the masses (Watson, Souza, & Trousdale, 2014). Even worse, the political movements swept all over the whole country during the following three decades and largely destroyed the educational systems, beliefs and religions and cultural heritage tradition (Watson, Souza, & Trousdale, 2014). According to Kong, Wang and Luo (2010), the collapse of the old spiritual beliefs and the difficulty of establishing new faiths in a short period has impacted negatively on people’s mental health and spiritual state, as people now unscrupulously seek material wealth, with humanistic quality declining and social credit and moral crises emerging.

Referring to the education system in China, Watson, Souza and Trousdale (2014) point out that “[o]ne key issue in the education system is the dominating examination-oriented culture,” which turns most students almost into “examinations machines” (p. 168). Similarly, Kong, Wang and Luo (2010) contend that the education of scores aims to select the fewest and eliminate the majority, instead of encouraging and promoting them. This is very true for my own childhood experiences, as my biggest aim was to please my parents with high scores in various examinations, leaving my spiritual life undeveloped throughout my childhood. Such score-oriented education never follows the principle of taking people as of foremost importance or respecting people’s humanity and life and it is doomed to result in tragedy (Shan Shibing, 2009, as cited in Kong, Wang & Luo, 2010).

A very famous case, the Ma Jiajue case, happened 10 years ago and may help us to get a glimpse of how lamed spiritual development can lead to destruction. Ma, who was a promising biochemistry student at Yunnan University and once won the second prize in the National Physics Olympics and the third place in a national mathematics competition, killed his four fellow students and friends brutally, because he was unable to bear the scorn and discrimination for being poor from his friends he once cherished. Even worse, when Ma was arrested, he gave up any defence by lawyers, because he did not know the meaning of life and he was simply expecting his death penalty. Ma’s case had drawn unprecedentedly tremendous attention from the entire society to the holistic development and spiritual health of students in China. People began to critically examine the present education system and social development conditions, and some believe that the examination-oriented education system and increasing money worship among students were the main reasons behind this tragic event. Following this case, many educational institutions, especially universities and colleges, have made numerous endeavours to set up student-aid systems, procedures or organisations to make sure that most students are spiritually healthy. However, there is a long way to go for Chinese people to draw lessons from the past and learn from other countries.

In New Zealand, people often place great importance on the spiritual development of young children. Spirituality is highly valued and considered in
building programmes for children. For example, the vision of Te Whāriki, the early childhood education curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand, aims for children “to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9). Te Whāriki also includes spiritual dimensions as an integral part of holistic development, as it reads “[l]earning and development will be integrated through: … recognition of the spiritual dimension of children’s lives in culturally, socially and individually appropriate ways…” (p. 41). Although guided by the same national curriculum, the practices aiming to foster the spiritual development vary in different contexts. According to Bone (2005, 2008), who carried out multiple researches into different contexts (including a Rudolf Steiner kindergarten, a Montessori school and an early childhood preschool) of early childhood education in New Zealand, such curricula are embedded with spirituality in different ways for daily activities, which is called “everyday spirituality”. At these settings, food, daily activities or ritual ceremonies can all be used as intermediaries to awaken or nurture the spirituality of children. Taking food as an example, in the Steiner kindergarten, “bread symbolises the spark of life that becomes tangible in food” (Bone, 2005, p. 310), while in the Montessori school, bread, as a different opportunity for learning, “became a means of “spiritual preparation” (Montessori, 1967, p. 8, as cited in Bone, 2005, p. 311). In the preschool, “[t]here was an emphasis on the value of cleanliness, obedience and moderation, described by Popov, Popov and Kavelin (1995) as “virtues” and recognising a range of virtues is for them an essential means of achieving “spiritual mastery” (p. 19, as cited in Bone, 2005, pp. 313-314)”. Spiritual development in childhood is interpreted and practised differently in different contexts of early childhood education.

In conclusion, spirituality is a very important dimension of the holistic development of children in the context of early childhood education. Its importance has been gradually recognised and valued by educators and philosophers. As Montessori believes, “[m]odern societies, due to their pervasive materialism, have neglected the spiritual forces that animate the human being, and our institutions, particularly schooling, have become repressive and damaging, turning people into slaves of the machine rather than cultivating their spiritual sensitivity” (Miller, 2004, p. 17). The advancement of Steiner and Montessori theories offers different teaching methods for cultivating spiritual development in childhood education. However, compared to Aotearoa/New Zealand, where the national curriculum underpinning the spirituality of early childhood education is practiced in diversified contexts, the spiritual dimension of childhood education still remains rather neglected or suppressed in China, due to historical reasons, a different educational culture, and the current development status.

References
