International Handbook of Holistic Education

John P. Miller, Kelli Nigh, Marni J. Binder, Bruce Novak, Sam Crowell

Moving the Spirit

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315112398-10

Jane Bone
Published online on: 18 Sep 2018

How to cite: Jane Bone. 18 Sep 2018, Moving the Spirit from: International Handbook of Holistic Education Routledge
Accessed on: 07 Sep 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315112398-10

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
A feature of early childhood education in Australia and Aoteaora New Zealand is the emphasis on holistic well-being as a key learning outcome. The vision for Te Whāriki, the curriculum for New Zealand, is that children will be “healthy in mind, body and spirit” (Ministry of Education, 2017). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) includes “good physical health, feelings of happiness, satisfaction and successful social functioning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 30) in the learning outcome for well-being. In early years education generally, holistic approaches to learning are important, particularly given the amount of time children spend in a range of preschool environments. In both Australia and New Zealand, preschools and kindergartens are usually sessional and children attend for three-hour sessions or otherwise attend long day care on a daily basis. The provision for long day care can mean that children will spend a significant amount of their lives in that context and, therefore, attention to the whole child is essential. Who this whole child is, and what being holistic means, involves engaging with “our values, our aspirations for the next generation, our beliefs about child development, and more generally, our cultural perspective” (Nimmo, 1998, p. 296). Nimmo (1998) also points out that one of the factors to consider is whether the child is seen as an individual or as a child in community. In this chapter, I am looking at the spiritual dimension as an aspect of what it means to be holistic and will discuss programs that consider the education of children to be a complex enterprise.

To be holistic from my perspective is merely to recognize the connectedness of all things. My definition of spirituality reflects this, as follows:

Spirituality connects people to each other, to all living things, to nature and the universe. Spirituality is a way of appreciating the wonder and mystery of everyday life. It alerts me to the possibility for love, happiness, goodness, peace and compassion in the world.

(Bone, 2010, p. 403)

From the spiritual and holistic viewpoint, it is impossible to focus on one area without influencing all aspects of the person. It may be considered an ethical imperative to realize that everything has meaning in the intra-activity (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010) that goes on in educational contexts, in and between people, animals, and things, the human and more than human. From this position, I look at some of the pedagogies and programs for young children that reflect this. There are always new and innovative
possibilities available in early childhood education. In this chapter, consideration is given to the implications of the increasing popularity of yoga in preschools, the advances in walking and getting out and about in preschools in Australia and New Zealand (bush and beach ‘kinder’ or kindergarten), and, finally, the attention being paid to aesthetics in terms of a beautiful environment and the effect on the spirit. This chapter refers to ‘moving the spirit’ and in this discussion I hope to play with the idea of movement in both its literal and metaphorical sense, physical, social, spiritual, and affective.

Methodology as Assemblage

This chapter is not based on research in a traditional sense. Instead, evidence has been gathered from a variety of sources and forms an assemblage of information and connections (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) drawing on the following sources: previous research, personal narrative/author journals, information from websites, anecdotal evidence, the literature, early childhood policy documents, and sources of inspiration that drive innovative approaches to pedagogy. Some of the practices described here have their genesis in different situations other than early childhood settings. Yoga, for example, is a ‘trickle down’ activity; two million adults in Australia do yoga in one form or another and it is the fastest growing fitness activity in Australia (Roy Morgan, 2016). It is probably inevitable that children became involved. The growing popularity of walking in nature has been influenced by the Forest Schools of Denmark (Elliot & Chancellor, 2014). Scandinavian approaches to pedagogy are influential and, despite the different environments, walking was destined to become a part of educational practice in places that also value outdoor activity, such as Australia and New Zealand. The impetus to create beautiful environments is influenced by the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, where the schools are carefully conceptualized and planned, are connected to an inspirational person (real or fictional), and are designed with the child in mind. These examples of initiatives that support holistic education are linked to well-being and spirituality.

Yoga: Body–Mind–Spirit

Yoga is one way that young children are encouraged to develop joy in movement. The emphasis on movement is a Western way of thinking about yoga. It is a word that means ‘to join, yoke together’ and this joining of body–mind–spirit is fundamental to yogic philosophy. According to B. K. S. Iyengar, who influenced yoga being popular in the West, the poses of yoga, or, more accurately, the āsanas, are holistic movements as “āsanas act as bridges to unite the body with the mind, and the mind with the soul” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 32). It is these movements, or postures, that programs with young children focus upon, rather than breathing or meditation and the more esoteric aspects of the practice.

In classical yoga, mindfulness and awareness are built through the practice of asana—and these postures are only one of the ‘eight limbs’ of yoga. The others include ethical principles and awareness of the breath. Iyengar (2002) interprets the yoga sutras of Patanjali as a guide for life and a way to “grow from life’s afflictions towards freedom” (p. 290). There is a link to resilience, an aspect of education that is important in the early years (Roberts, 2010). Yoga encourages the thought that inner peace becomes something that is inside, not something dependent upon external rewards or material goods. Through the practice of āsana, “senses and mind are brought under control” (Iyengar, 2002, p. 290). While yoga may be fun in early childhood contexts, there is serious intent behind the practice of yoga.

In the West, yoga is usually thought of in terms of physical movements: for example, downward dog, or triangle pose, or tree. The stretches and postures that represent movements usually associated with animals are some of the more accessible ways that contemporary yoga programs connect with
children. When researching with young children, I noticed that they engaged in the play of ‘becom-
ing animal’ and suggested that this is “metamorphic play” (Bone, 2010). This play implies a spiritual
aspect whereby the child can become Other in the moment and may suddenly wash her face like a
cat or prance like a horse. These becomings are moments of intensity and children may no longer be
present but in an imaginative world of their own as another creature entirely. Parents and educators
also notice that children’s imaginative play includes ‘becoming animal’. Children not only relate to
pets and soft toys that are part of their world but they also become animal, seemingly at will. I sug-
ggested in my article (Bone, 2010) that this spiritual aspect of play is very powerful and metamorphosis
refers to the spiritual journey of change and the Pythagorean journey to the next world that could
only be undertaken as a bird or animal. In Hindu mythology, the gods are often animal gods. For
example, Hanuman, who embodies the monkey temperament and range of movement and facial
expressions, and Ganesha, half man, half elephant, who embodies the strength of both. In shamanistic
religions, becoming animal has a curative effect and it is the animal that gives the healers their power.
In these spiritual perspectives, the animal spirit is channelled and used for good and this relates to
emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

Becoming animal involves moving the body in certain ways, often ways that are associated with
particular animals, such as trotting, pouncing, or waving a trunk, or turning the head in certain ways
and this is the aspect that popular and successful yoga programs tune into. They access the intuitive
world of play and the movements that children have observed. Danahy (nd, p. 9) describes a teacher
of young children who used yoga to regulate the energy and emotions in her room “she reminds
Joseph to go into his turtle shell to help him calm down. She does monkey breaths with Katherine as
she works through her sillies” (original italics). Popular programs that include yoga are taught in a
way that is less formal than the usual classes for adults. In recent research where pre-school children
were asked, they said that they enjoyed yoga and they were positive about this activity and could
also articulate why it supported their health and relaxation (Stapp & Wolff, 2017). In the adult world,
yoga classes are ritualistic and the practice is commodified. It is considered essential to have mats and
yoga clothing, to find an attractive setting, and the right teacher and yoga school. Yoga for children
is presented in a way that is more fun (Engel, 2016). Early childhood teachers can use the internet
or a book to teach poses. Even when not familiar with the animal or bird, children enjoy becoming
the being that is celebrated in the āsana.

Through yoga, children experience connecting with animals and nature in their bodies as
they move toward learning to be present in the moment (Iyengar, 2002). Being present and
enjoying the moment is something that people who engage with spiritual practices spend much
time and effort trying to achieve. In yoga, the positive effects of moving with mindfulness and
awareness in a way that acknowledges the breath (pranayama) is a way of staying in the present.
The individual works, even when part of a group, in a non-competitive and focused way. When
becoming tree, for example, children are learning to balance but also to be strong and to pay
attention and remain still and calm in order to maintain the position. Breathing and the gaze of
the eyes are used to maintain focus and concentration. At the same time, falling or overbalanc-
ing is not seen as ‘wrong’, merely an opportunity to feel that life is never perfect and that one
can always try again.

For some people, the reflection of our animal self in the āsana is problematic. It is thought that we
need to grow up and in some way leave this behind, or the animal is seen as undesirable and inferior
to the human. Contemporary posthuman theory proposes entanglements rather than binaries and
hierarchies (Haraway, 2008). In the human struggle to become more intelligent, raise the IQ, be first
in the class, and become an A grade student, it is easy to forget that the brain is part of the body and
is nourished in physical movement and by movement of the breath.

I describe one āsana below, the cobra and give details of the instruction, the physical movement,
and the symbolism that the movement represents. This is a movement that anyone with a back
problem will have been urged to do.
The Cobra

Instruction: Begin by lying full length on the floor, face down, with hands palms down flat on the floor under the shoulders, elbows raised. Start with the face down and, as you breathe in, raise your head slowly upward, passing forehead and nose lightly along the mat. Press the pelvis and legs into the floor. Start with the toes touching but if they come apart as you raise your head just allow this to happen. When at the highest point (this may well not be very high at all) work on dropping the shoulders, feel the neck lengthen and bring the head back like a cobra before it strikes. Let the gaze be upwards.

Commentary: According to B.K.S. Iyengar “like a snake, the spine should be moved from end to end; when the head moves the movement is transmitted to the tail” (Iyengar, as cited in Radha, 1995, p. 149). “The symbol of the cobra can be found in twenty-two of the major countries of the world. Its deadly poison means instant death, yet its ability to shed its skin symbolizes renewal and resurrection . . . the paradox of the struggle of life” (Radha, 1995, p. 149).

Swami Sivananda Radha (1995, p. 149) recognizes that to start with, to be prone, facing down, “is a humbling and fearful position. . . .” Later in the movement she says, “I feel as if I am locked into position. What am I locked into?” and “I think of the snake, its eyes are always open, always seeing, always alert” (p. 149).

The lessons to be taken from the movement are truly holistic. There is also an element in yoga that is about taking the body back to positions that are relatively easy in childhood. The baby lies on its stomach and raises its head up and looks around. The movement is easy, a baby push-up, it enables the infant to see the world differently before he or she can sit up or stand unaided. The body loses flexibility and motion and, by working in this way, children are encouraged to keep this range of movement, and, in yogic philosophy, if the body is flexible so might the mind be. The infant who lifts up on his or her hands is curious and delights in this movement and is happy to repeat it over and over; holistic learning is happening, it is natural and joyful.

Movement is located in the body of the individual and as dance and joyful celebration of life also enriches the community.

At a community event recently the dancers, who were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people and from West Papua, suddenly ‘became’ kangaroo(s). They lay on the ground and held fingers behind their head like the upright ears of the kangaroo and reclined like kangaroos in the late afternoon sun. Later, they asked the children to become horse, making trotting movements and holding their hands as if holding reins; in this movement the children were both horse and rider. The children joined in and the community came together in appreciation of the artistry and the way that the young dancers inspired the children to dance, sing, and move. It is these events that preschools can organize and that change people’s lives. As the Elder put on her possum skin cloak and began to speak, and as the djeridoo made the earth vibrate, the crowd of parents and visitors fell silent and were completely present in the moment. This is also ‘yoga’ – the joining, or ‘yoking’, of body and soul.

Walking: Nature–Mindfulness–Belonging

Walking outside the preschool and walking in nature, on the beach or in a park, is increasingly part of the weekly program in preschools in Australia and New Zealand. In Aotearoa New Zealand, it is seen as important to know your local mountain (te maunga) and river (te awa) and in Māori culture this knowledge is part of knowing who you are and where you stand in the world. In a
project that took children outside the gates of the preschool, the children mapped their locality and the project provided an opening for both them and the teachers to explore the history and natural features of the place where they lived and worked (Bone, 2014). Children showed that they were very knowledgeable about their locality. A side effect of the research is that the community felt invited into the preschool, boundaries were more permeable, and connections with the community increased. Ingold and Vergunst (2008, p. 2) note that walking is social and “lives are paced out in their mutual relations”. Living beings find out who they are, what they know, and where they are going through walking and accessing physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional skills together with a spiritual sense of belonging. In the Australian Early Years Learning Framework, it is expected that children will “develop an increased understanding of the interdependence between land, people, plants and animals”, “develop an awareness of the impact of human activity on environments”, and respect their community (DEEWR, 2009, p. 29). In Australia, children learn to connect to country and this is encouraged in spaces like public parks and gardens, places of diversity and richness that collaborate with schools and provide resources for teachers (Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne, 2013).

Walking connects to certain fields of study, for example, eco-psychology. In this regard, Trigwell, Francis, and Bagot (2014, p. 241) introduce the idea of ‘eudaimonic well-being’ as a connection to nature that is mediated by spirituality. From their perspective, mental health is enhanced through this relationship and “those who are highly nature-connected may find a sense of purpose or meaningful existence from their closeness with nature” (p. 243). This connection has a long tradition in early childhood, from Froebel’s ‘garden for children’ to ‘beach kinder’ in Australia and programs such as Ngahere Tamariki—children of the forest (Schwalger, 2016) in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a measure of the attention being paid to holistic aspects of well-being and education that research is coming forward that supports what is being carried out with young children.

The influence of Danish forest-schools has spread (Elliot & Chancellor, 2014) and is a pedagogical practice that is attractive in countries that have adequate outdoor spaces for children to explore and enjoy. Elliot & Chancellor (2014, p. 46) say that “the key underlying feature of the forest preschool approach is that children spend long and regular periods of time in unstructured play in natural forest or beach environments”. In conjunction with environmental concerns and a changing image of the child as a redemptive agent in this time of climate change and extinctions, it is being increasingly seen as desirable for children to be in parks, bush, and on beaches, rather than confined within the boundaries of the preschool. Louv (2005) proposed ‘nature-deficit’ as a condition of disadvantage due to children being discouraged from being in wild places and his influential book encouraged early childhood educators to enlarge areas of play and exploration for children in their care and to ensure that children spend time outdoors. In their analysis of an Australian Bush Kinder program, Elliot & Chancellor (2014, p. 51) conclude that “children’s health, wellbeing, learning and development” will drive, and enhance, children’s interactions in nature.

In the Pacific region, recognizing that connections to nature will change attitudes has never been more important (Nunn et al., 2016). The way that children show their engagement in the world through walking has the potential to influence families and their decision-making about environmental issues. Nunn et al. (2016) argue that spiritual beliefs impact upon the ability of communities and individuals to adapt to environmental changes and when the threat is extreme this becomes important. Australia and New Zealand are countries in the Pacific and it is our neighbours, some 10 million people (Nunn et al., 2016), who are already suffering from rising temperatures and sea levels. It is sobering and inspiring to think that, as an early childhood educator, by taking a holistic approach to planning and by incorporating walking into a weekly program, this might eventually encourage rich countries to help their more vulnerable neighbours. This perspective acknowledges children as agents in the world.
Walking is movement and a way to be mindful in action. There is time to look around, to notice, to be distracted, and feel grounded. When I walk, there is so much to see and feel. I am also aware of the air, the atmosphere, the spirit of the place: noise and dust on city streets, the texture of sand on the beach, rain, the shape of trees. These things change my mood, and walking is an affective activity. Irwin (2006) proposes that walking offers “spiritual, sensory, and perceptual awareness” and she records and celebrates the movement, color, and variety that are offered her when walking. As an adult, I can walk as a deliberate spiritual activity, in mindfulness, or on a pilgrimage. Adults document their walks, taking photographs, keeping journals, noting the number of steps taken on fitness bracelets.

Children walk in different ways. On the walking project called “Our Place” (Bone, 2014), the children walked and talked, enjoying time in small groups with their teacher. In many preschools, the whole class goes out and walks with teachers, parents, and helpers. This involves educators in risk assessments and they carry First Aid equipment and sunscreen and insect repellent; the children have bags with play lunches and water.

It is adults who can support or burden children when walking, giving too many rules and restrictions or letting them go free. In the Danish preschools, the children walk off into the forest and are gone from sight. They learn to be at home in the pine trees, a landscape that I find dark and slightly threatening. In this way, people find their place and develop a sense of attachment to it. This is something spiritual that continues through life, in the desert, by the sea, or on the street (Bone, 2016). Walking is something that, as Jung (2014) discovered, even when lost or challenging, is also “holistic, mindful, and adventurous” (p. 622). Jung suggests that there are layers of walking, and that mindful walking is something different, it is:

an interactive way of knowing, allowing the entire body, and all of its senses to experience its surroundings, to trace, and connect different areas, to intuitively sense when and how to avoid potential dangers, and to live in the entangled social pathways.

(p. 625, original italics)

Mindful walking, for an inspiring local educator whom I know, means to discover but not to take anything away from the place. Her program is based on connections to the local Boonwurrung people and the advice of the Elder is followed. Another innovative early childhood leader suggests that the point of walking with children is to let them wander off, so that they experience their surroundings and gain a sense of discovery, with only basic restrictions and boundaries. There is no right or wrong way of walking; it is a way of being in the world, being present, always in movement.

**Beautiful Environments: Space–Peace–Aesthetics**

Children respond to the beauty of nature and are also aware of the indoor environment. Binder (2016, p. 294) suggests that art forms and aesthetics are “a cohesive conscious joining of the creative to the everyday” and she finds that “balance and harmony” can be achieved through “lived aesthetic experience” (p. 293). This experience may be provided for children or it may be something they contribute to in the spaces where they live and learn. In the opinion of Curtis and Carter (2003),
carefully designed and beautiful settings provoke wonder, curiosity, and intellectual engagement. They are aware of the joyful reactions and interactions of children in rich environments, full of magic and treasures “sparkles and shadows” (p. 121). Beautiful environments are not static. Curtis and Carter (2003) appreciate the way different people create beauty, and an example is given of an employee in an early childhood setting. They say:

Mr Banks, the custodian, takes time to create a beautiful design in the sandbox with his tools. As the children arrive, they can’t wait to see what he’s done and talk eagerly about how they might add to it or change it during their sandbox play.

(p. 109)

According to Curtis and Carter “children are intrigued with natural phenomena and the physical properties around them—things such as light, colour, reflection, sound motion” (p. 121). When materials and environments are aesthetically pleasing, children find it easier to explore spaces that are calm, soft, different, safe, and that provide sensory experiences. These elements can be healing for children; they feel welcomed into spaces that are attractive and inviting. Children who are invited find their sense of well-being enhanced because “the arrangements and provisions in the physical environment create the context for the socio-emotional climate and the quality of interactions among the people there” (Curtis & Carter, 2003, p. 24). Perhaps a shared and beautiful environment will bring out the best in people. Carlina Rinaldi (2006, p. 176), a key pedagogical influence in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, acknowledges this when she says that “beauty orients and attracts”. People travel huge distances to see beautiful places that may be very old, or modern and contemporary, carved out of natural features or carefully constructed, finished or unfinished, like La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, beautiful in its imperfection.

An early advocate for aesthetically pleasing and peaceful spaces for children was Maria Montessori. She felt that it was up to teachers to prepare environments for children that “encourage the natural tendency to investigate and theorise about things that provoke a sense of magic and wonder” (Montessori, 1970, p. 122). She always connected this to the spiritual aspect of the child, and proposed the child as a spiritual embryo, and, “like the physical embryo, the spiritual embryo must be protected by an external environment animated by the warmth of love and the richness of value” (p. 35). Her experiences setting up the Casa di Bambini in Rome meant that she noticed a difference in behavior and demeanor in children who lived in overcrowded conditions and who entered a school that was calm and peaceful. She felt that this kind of environment soothed the soul of the child and influenced everyone who worked there. Montessori deliberately created an environment intended to support “a sense of peace and well-being, of cleanliness and intimacy” (Montessori, 1967, p. 37). She felt that the environment should not have anything harmful, but instead encourage “ease and grace” and a sense of freedom (p. 48). The influence of Montessori is still obvious in preschools that operate with her philosophy in mind, because of her attention to the materials, furniture, and decorative features that she felt constructed the educational experience for children (Bone, 2017).

The Italian cultural sense of aesthetics is also evident in contemporary early childhood practice because of the attention given to design in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, the famous Italian preschools. Their influence has been felt globally and the Reggio discourse of documentation, dialogue, and design has impacted upon preschools in Australia and New Zealand. The beautiful environment from the Reggio Emilia perspective is a “relational space” and also holistic, consisting of “an environmental fabric rich in information, without formal rules. It is not the representation of a School, but a whole made up of many different identities, with a recognizable feel about it” (Ceppi & Zini, 1998). They go on to say that “the aesthetic quality depends [also] on the quality of the connections (the aesthetic of links)” (Ceppi & Zini, 1998, np). This is a spiritual aspect of these environments, the connectedness of all things made possible by the “aesthetic of links” (Ceppi & Zini, 1998, np).
Working with an eye to Reggio principles and aesthetic promptings has encouraged some preschools to use softer colors, to be aware of light, and to think about arrangements of spaces through a design aesthetic that focuses on the beautiful rather than the utilitarian. A preschool I enjoyed being in was remarkably peaceful, with small spaces for children as opposed to large bright-colored Macdonaldized spaces. Children could choose a place that suited their mood and what they wanted to do; they could be sociable or work on their own and the materials available were attractive and there was a sense of order. In this model of beautiful preschool design, the children moved carefully, had conversations, and were respectful; it was also a place full of laughter but without endless noise and distraction. The New Zealand curriculum for early childhood mentions that “the design of the physical environment” may present barriers to learning and participation (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13). The preschool I have described made learning and participation more likely.

There is not one pathway to beauty and Waldorf kindergartens have their own ideas of what is appropriate and beautiful, using specific soft colors, wood, and natural materials in the kindergarten. Some preschools only use sustainable or recycled materials and furniture so they have a different look. But both show that they are mindful and make careful decisions about these spaces. The preschool in its entirety speaks to children and influences their lives. Rinaldi (2006) suggests that these kinds of decisions give what happens as a result special value, a value that, according to her view, is important because “you’re choosing, you’re taking responsibility” (p. 198). In this conceptualization of what is of value, the activity of making choices is reflected in the environment, and not just in the surroundings, but in the pedagogy. She says, “education is really about being passionate together. To have feelings together. To have emotions together” (p. 204). When this is a feature of the early childhood setting, then spaces may be beautiful because they reflect culture or are sustainable. It is unlikely that they will be conventional and bland. Holistic education is sensory and reflects a focus on well-being that may take many forms in the spaces where it operates.

Conclusion

Early childhood education has a holistic orientation and in the Early Years Framework for Australia attention is paid to holistic approaches to practice, a practice that will “recognise the connectedness of mind, body and spirit” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). This statement continues, “when early childhood educators take a holistic approach they pay attention to children’s physical, personal, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 24). These aspirations are shared by the New Zealand curriculum Te Whāriki, where holistic development, or kotahitanga, is a key principle (Ministry of Education, 2017). In this curriculum, the spiritual aspect is acknowledged as being a link between all other dimensions “across time and space” (p. 19).

In this chapter, yoga has been presented as an activity that moves the body and spirit; walking in nature is another holistic practice and, finally, attention is paid to beautiful environments as a way to move, and lift, the spirit. These three aspects of holistic education in early childhood are intended to acknowledge the work that has been done to respect the whole child in their communities. Influences from the past have been mentioned as well as contemporary initiatives and connections to community have been made. These programs are not specifically mentioned in policy documents, but they show the rich interpretations and creative responses possible when meeting requirements for the holistic education of young children.

References


