Spirituality in Social Work Education and Practice in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

There is growing interest worldwide in the place of spirituality in social work practice, but as yet very little research in Aotearoa New Zealand. This study examines how non-Māori former students of the social work programme at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa experienced spirituality during the programme and how it is applied in their social work practice. As a non-Māori researcher who has engaged with spirituality in a Māori environment, the researcher places herself in relation to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, bicultural practice and critical theory. Participants discuss the importance of spirituality in their own lives, their experiences at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, and the relevance of spirituality to social work practice. The bicultural nature of the social work programme as expressed through ngā take pū, the underpinning bicultural principles, is also examined.

The study found that engaging with the social work teaching programme at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa was a spiritual experience which enhanced and deepened participants’ sense of their own spirituality and flowed through into their practice. They describe their spiritual practice with reference to client needs and social work models, including blocks and ethical dilemmas. The study identifies some elements of the Wānanga programme which were associated with spiritual development and learning and suggests that these may be helpful for other social work education programmes. It also suggests that social work practitioners can use existing models to incorporate spirituality into their practice.
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## Contents

### Chapter 1: Introduction

- Research objective ........................................................................................................2
- Personal journey ...........................................................................................................3
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi and biculturalism ........................................................................5
  - Te Tiriti o Waitangi ...................................................................................................5
  - Biculturalism ..............................................................................................................6
- Thesis format ................................................................................................................7

### Chapter 2: Perspectives on Spirituality and their Impact on Welfare Provision in Aotearoa New Zealand

- Spirituality ...................................................................................................................9
- Western perspectives ....................................................................................................9
  - Spirituality and religion: should we differentiate? ..................................................10
  - Definitions of spirituality .........................................................................................11
  - Spirituality and social justice and empowerment ....................................................13
  - Spirituality and the environment .............................................................................13
- Indigenous perspectives on spirituality .................................................................13
  - The spiritual dimension in Aotearoa New Zealand .................................................15
- Discussion ..................................................................................................................17
- Spirituality and the development of welfare in Aotearoa New Zealand .................18
- Māori society prior to colonisation ..........................................................................18
- Colonisation and welfare ..........................................................................................19
  - Church involvement .................................................................................................20
  - Consequences for Māori .........................................................................................21
- Re-enter spirituality into Western social work .........................................................22
  - The Indigenous response in Aotearoa New Zealand ............................................23
  - Contemporary Māori models of practice ...............................................................24
  - Taha wairua: the spiritual element ..........................................................................25
- Summary ....................................................................................................................25
Chapter 3: Spirituality in Social Work Education

The case for including spirituality in the social work curriculum ........................................28
Practitioner views .............................................................................................................29
Course content and teaching methods ........................................................................30
Responding to cultural diversity ..................................................................................31
Indigenous knowledge in social work education ............................................................32
Locating the debate in Aotearoa New Zealand ...............................................................33
Introducing a Māori perspective into social work education ........................................35
A Māori response to education: a new paradigm ..........................................................36
Establishment of Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa .......................................................37
Establishment of Wānanga ..........................................................................................37
Te Wānanga o Aotearoa ................................................................................................38
The social work teaching programme at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa ..................................40
Teaching and learning .................................................................................................41
Mode of delivery ...........................................................................................................42
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................43

Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design

Justification for the research ..........................................................................................45
Methodology ..................................................................................................................47
Te Tiriti o Waitangi .......................................................................................................47
A bicultural approach ....................................................................................................48
Qualitative research .....................................................................................................50
Researching from within a Māori institution: issues for a non-Māori researcher ..........50
Should non-Māori undertake research with Māori? ...................................................52
Kaupapa Māori Research ............................................................................................52
Constructing a methodology: interacting world views ..................................................53
The contribution of critical theory ................................................................................55
Creating a space ............................................................................................................57
Research Design ..........................................................................................................60
Selecting participants ...................................................................................................60
Conducting the interviews .........................................................................................60
Data analysis .................................................................................................................61
Significance ...................................................................................................................62
Chapter 5: Participants' Voices

Theme 1: Spirituality ................................................................. 67
  Spirituality and religion ......................................................... 67
  Spirituality as individual experience ....................................... 68
  Spirituality as universal experience ......................................... 69
  Spirituality as connectedness ................................................. 71
  Spirituality as healing, forgiveness and hope ......................... 72

Theme 2: Experiences of spirituality at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa ........ 73
  From nervous beginnings to acceptance and connectedness .......... 73
  The learning environment ......................................................... 75

Theme 3: Spirituality and social work practice .............................. 78
  Relevance of spirituality to practice ........................................ 79

Theme 4: Spiritual practice .......................................................... 80
  Models and theories ............................................................... 81
  Culturally appropriate practice ............................................. 83

Theme 5: Ngā take pū ................................................................. 86
  Interpretation and application .................................................. 86
  Āhurutanga (safe space) ......................................................... 86
  Whakakoha rangatiratanga (respectful relationships) ................ 87
  Tino rangatiratanga (absolute integrity) ................................... 88
  Taukumekume (positive and negative tension) ......................... 88
  Kaitiakitanga (responsible stewardship) ................................... 89
  Mauri ora (wellbeing) .............................................................. 89
  Contribution to practice .......................................................... 89

Chapter 6: Analysis and Discussion .................................................. 91

Theme 1: Spirituality ................................................................. 91
  Spirituality and religion ......................................................... 92
  Spirituality as individual experience ....................................... 92
  Spirituality as universal experience ......................................... 93
  Spirituality as creativity, growth, continuity and change ........... 94
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as connectedness</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and social justice</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as healing, forgiveness and hope</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A darker spirituality</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: Experiences of spirituality at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From nervous beginnings to acceptance and connectedness</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learning environment</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as experiential learning</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality as integral to the programme</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Spirituality and social work practice</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of spirituality to practice</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal spirituality and practice</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4: Spiritual practice</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models and theories</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying spiritual strengths</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauri Ora and Te Whare Tapa Whā</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and the elderly</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally appropriate practice</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to spiritual practice</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency practice</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicalisation of spirituality</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 5: Nga take pū</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation and application</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 7: Recommendations and conclusion**

Recommendations                                                                 | Page |
------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
Recommendation one                                                       | 112  |
Recommendation two                                                       | 113  |
Recommendation three                                                     | 113  |
Suggestions for further research                                         | 114  |
One: Ethics and culturally appropriate practice                          | 114  |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two: Medicalisation of spirituality</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three: Barriers to spiritual practice</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and conclusion</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1: Data Analysis tables</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2: Massey Ethics Application</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3: Te Wānanga o Aotearoa Ethics Application</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures and Tables

Figures
Figure 4.1: Methodology ..........................................................59

Tables
Table 3.1: Ngā Take Pū ..........................................................41
Table 4.1: Te Wānanga o Aotearoa values .............................46
Table 4.2: Application of ngā take pū to research ethics ...........65