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*Peace Guardians*

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# Peace Guardians, Watts Bears and The Maori Haka

## **Abstract**

In the summer of 2017, Peace Guardians carried out a summer school program for twenty inner city kids ranging from 8-13 years old in Watts Los Angeles. The program was part of the annual Watts Bears summer school. The Watts Bears are group of student football and track athletes coached by the Los Angeles Police Department. Working in conjunction with the Watts officers and coaches, Peace Guardians and guest teachers spent four hours a day with the students facilitating mindfulness exercises and the Haka as wellness tools to incorporate into their lives in and out of the classroom and football field. The use of the Ancient Maori practice in modern day contexts serves as a fusion of cultural storytelling and with modern interpretations. The Watts Bears students mapped out their own Haka to be performed before Games.

## **Author/Artist Bio**

Zachariah Fisher is the founder of Peace Guardians. Zachariah's passion for youth empowerment started as a baby. Having lost his father at 10 months old, he always felt called to carry his father's legacy and mentor youth. His teaching style is known for deeper connection to oneself through mindfulness and ancient wisdom practices. Starting his teaching career while studying at UCLA, Zachariah was the youngest PE coach in LAUSD from 2003-2007. He founded Camp with Coach Zach which serviced over 1,500 kids in Los Angeles and offered activities including a wide variety of Sports, Martial Arts, Yoga and Drumming. He is a certified kids yoga teacher and is also trained in Trauma Informed Yoga and Atma Yoga with Saul David Raye. He has dedicated his life to cultivating the master within all youth and is fully committed to continuing that mission through Peace Guardians.

## **Keywords**

mindfulness, culture, art, science, football, education, haka, inner city, police, cultural

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## **Peace Guardians, Watts Bears and the Maori Haka: A Fusion of Ancient Cultural Art Practices and Modern Neuroplasticity Research**

*Zachariah Fisher*

Peace Guardians is a multicultural, multidisciplinary youth organization that provides mindfulness tools and resources in schools, learning communities, workshops, teacher trainings and at risk centers/organizations throughout the Greater Los Angeles area. In the summer of 2017, Peace Guardians carried out a summer school program for twenty inner city kids ranging from 8-13 years old in Watts Los Angeles. The program was part of the annual Watts Bears summer school. The Watts Bears are group of student football and track athletes coached by the Los Angeles Police Department. Working in conjunction with the Watts officers and coaches, Peace Guardians and guest teachers spent four hours a day with the students facilitating mindfulness exercises as wellness tools to incorporate into their lives in and out of the classroom and football field. The program was sponsored by Sunwarrior (a nutrition company) and each day lessons on nutrition and how to make super-food smoothies were carried out.

At the heart of the summer school, was the teachings of the Indigenous Maori practice known as the Haka. The Peace Guardians team was led through a Haka training in January of 2017 carried out by New Zealander Whakapaingia Luke. Peace Guardians brought the Haka to the Watts Bears ensuring that the traditions were known, honored and shared before teaching the movements, words, translation and gestures. In addition, the

students were provided lesson plans on the use of the Haka, including history, origin, tradition, functionality and modern day context.



*Group shot of the Watts Bears after former National Football League (NFL) Pro Bowler and current Mindfulness coach Keith Mitchell along with Nutritionist and Athlete Koya Webb offered an inspirational talk.*

During the summer, the primary context for modern day use, was the New Zealand National Rugby team, The All Blacks. The All Blacks are the winningest team in professional team sports history and perform the Haka before each Rugby Match. During the summer program, multiple video examples of the All Blacks Haka was screened on a projector for viewing. The videos were often paused for student discussion and inquiry. With the primary athletic focus of American Football for the Watts Bears, the intensity, camaraderie and power of the All Blacks as well as the University of Hawaii football teams Haka was a daily inspiration for the twenty students.

The use of the Ancient Maori practice in modern day contexts serves as a fusion of cultural storytelling and with modern interpretations. Ka Mate Haka was utilized as the primary backbone for Haka lessons plans throughout the summer. The Te Rauparaha haka is probably the best known of all hakas. Before each international match the All Blacks, New Zealand's national rugby team, chant the Te Rauparaha haka. (New Zealand in History, 2008, para. 1).

During the summer school, we utilized the All Blacks as inspiration to carry out the practice. “Before the arrival of the first Europeans in New Zealand, no written language existed in the Māori society. All information and knowledge could only survive if passed on successfully from one generation to the next. Through this, they formed and cultivated their own mythology to record their past and tell the stories and legends of gods, heroes and tribal leaders (Haka Tours, 2017, para.4).

Storytelling became an integral component of the summer program. Through the use of storytelling, the students conjured up their own narratives around the use of the Haka. Once the basic history and origin of the Haka was discussed among the students, the next challenge was to create their own. In collaboration with Zachariah Fisher, founder of Peace Guardians and Rocco Nugent, assistant facilitator, the students mapped out their own Haka through a series of discussion, voting, trial and practice.

The final created Haka words were voted on and were as follows:

*Watts, Watts, We are One*

*We stand proud, We stand strong*

*We are a The Bears, Here we belong*

*Bears, Bears, We are one*

*We stand proud, we stand strong*

*We are a Family, Here we belong*

*Been through it all, we stand tall*

*Here we belong, we stand Strong*

*We rise to the Challenge, Our heads held high*

*Fire, Water, Earth and Sky*

*Prepped and ready for this game*

*Awaken in your dreams, Remember our Name*

*Bears, Bears, Watts Bears!!*



*After practice, the Watts Bears come together. 1, 2, 3 Bears, 4, 5, 6 Family. Assistant Coach with blue hat, head coach Officer Grant Goosby in back, Peace Guardians Founder Zachariah Fisher on right.*

The outcome of the summer school was a powerful fusion of Art, Culture, Mindfulness and Science. From a neuroscience perspective, “sustained exposure to a set of cultural experiences and behavioral practices has been shown to affect neural structure and function. The hypothesis is that neural function is affected by cultural practices, particularly activations in ventral visual cortex—areas associated with perceptual processing.” (Park & Huang, 2010, p.391) Through the ancient practice of Haka, the students developed increased Cultural literacy, enhanced group dynamics and interpersonal

connection. The Peace Guardians staff notated the impact of the practice of Haka in terms of social dynamics during football free play on breaks. There was a clear distinction in the findings. As the Haka practice and specifically the collaborative process of creating their own deepened, the teamwork displayed on the field had noticeable improvements in relationship to decreased arguing and increased sportsmanship. According to students, parents, Watts police officers and Peace Guardians staff, the Haka practice increased self-regulation, social skills and focus.



*Peace Guardians Youth Ambassador Akida talking with friends before our Haka practice.*

For more information on the Peace Guardians, please visit: [www.peaceguardians.org](http://www.peaceguardians.org)

For more information on the Watts Bears, please visit: [www.wattsbears.com](http://www.wattsbears.com)



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