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# **The Spiritual Dimension in Children aged 3 to 12. Conceptualization and Guidelines for its Development in the Stages of Early Childhood and Primary Education.**

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# CONSTANCIA REGISTRAL

*Porque no se enseña lo que se ignora, como no se da lo que no se tiene.*

**Platón**

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A mis directores: Belén y Juan Carlos. Vuestra guía, consejos, e infinita paciencia han sido decisivos en este logro profesional, pero sobre todo en mi desarrollo personal.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This doctoral thesis endeavors to address the challenge of integrating the spiritual dimension into early childhood and primary education through three complementary methodological approaches. The initial study offers a theoretical and conceptual framework, delineating spirituality as a human dimension comprising intrapersonal, relational, and transcendental components, distinguishing it from religious instruction. The second article presents a quantitative study exploring the perceptions and beliefs of nearly 500 teachers in Spanish Catholic schools. The findings indicate a general recognition of spirituality's educational value. However, they also highlight conceptual confusion, a lack of training, and institutional constraints. The third study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating surveys and focus groups, and proposes pedagogical guidelines to promote spiritual development in the classroom in an inclusive, non-confessional manner. The thesis makes a significant contribution to the field by offering a comprehensive understanding of how spirituality can be integrated into schools. It provides a range of evidence-based proposals to support the implementation of this integration. The document calls for teacher training, institutional support, and a reflective, open-minded approach that respects cultural and religious diversity. This work aligns with international educational goals that promote holistic development and reinforce the need to cultivate inner life, ethical reflection, and a sense of meaning from the earliest stages of education.

## **RESUMEN**

El propósito de la presente tesis doctoral consiste en abordar el desafío de integrar la dimensión espiritual en los niveles de educación infantil y primaria, mediante la implementación de un diseño con tres enfoques metodológicos complementarios. El estudio inicial provee un marco teórico y conceptual, en el cual se define la espiritualidad como una dimensión humana que comprende componentes intrapersonales, relacionales y trascendentales, y que se distingue de la instrucción religiosa. El segundo artículo presenta un estudio cuantitativo que explora las percepciones y creencias de casi 500 profesores de escuelas católicas españolas. Los resultados obtenidos en este estudio indican un reconocimiento generalizado del valor educativo de la espiritualidad. No obstante, se evidencia una confusión conceptual, una deficiencia en la formación y restricciones institucionales. El tercer estudio adopta un enfoque metodológico mixto, incorporando técnicas de encuesta y grupos focales, y propone directrices pedagógicas destinadas a fomentar el desarrollo espiritual en el contexto escolar de manera inclusiva y secularizada. La tesis realiza una relevante contribución al campo de la espiritualidad en la educación, al proporcionar una comprensión integral sobre la integración de la espiritualidad en el entorno escolar. Se presenta una serie de propuestas fundamentadas en la evidencia que respaldan la puesta en marcha de la integración en cuestión. El documento en cuestión propone la implementación de estrategias orientadas a la formación continua del profesorado, el fortalecimiento de las instituciones educativas y la adopción de un enfoque reflexivo y receptivo que valore la diversidad cultural y religiosa. Este trabajo se alinea con los objetivos educativos internacionales que promueven el desarrollo integral y refuerzan la necesidad de cultivar la vida interior, la reflexión ética y el

sentido de la vida desde las primeras etapas de la educación.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Greatness must be inspired by spiritual strength, since the human spirit is the only one capable of overcoming all limitations, of trusting in success beyond the immediate and the apparent, of suffering martyrdom for goals that will not be achieved in a lifetime and of accepting failure without considering it as a defeat.*

*Rabindranath Tagore*

### *Contextualization*

The spiritual dimension must be recognized as an essential part of a person's integral development. As articulated by Seneca in his *Moral Letters to Lucilius* (Ep. 106): The Latin phrase "Non scholae sed vitae discimus" encapsulates this philosophy, translating to "We learn not for school, but for life." Although the Cordovan philosopher's assertion was intended as a critique of his era's educational framework, this notion encapsulates the fundamental purpose of education, which is to cultivate well-rounded human beings rather than merely transmitting knowledge. The cultivation of the soul, the nourishment of the inner self, and the strengthening of the spiritual dimension are educational acts in the noblest sense, for they prepare people to live with meaning, responsibility, and compassion.

The integration of spirituality into education signifies the provision of a space for introspection, empathy, and the search for meaning, while respecting the plurality of convictions. This integration does not entail the imposition of beliefs; rather, it is an effort to create an environment conducive to the exploration of spirituality. This impels a pressing need to reevaluate the prevailing educational paradigm, transcending the limitations of reductionist models that prioritize solely academic achievement while neglecting to nurture conscientious, empathetic, and discerning citizens. Contemporary education systems continue to focus disproportionately on standardized testing, cognitive performance, and technical skills, often at the expense of developing moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that are equally essential for human flourishing and social cohesion. As Noddings (2005) argues, "producing competent but uncaring students is a serious failure of education" (p. 1), highlighting the importance of cultivating the capacity to care, reflect, and relate meaningfully to others. In this regard, reimagining education means embracing a more holistic view of the learner—one that acknowledges inner life, ethical development, and a sense of purpose as core educational concerns.

Such a transformation necessitates that educational institutions transcend the confines of narrowly defined competencies and embrace more expansive developmental objectives that encompass the entirety of human experience. As Biesta (2010) observes, education encompasses not only the acquisition of qualifications but also the processes of socialization and subjectification, aimed at fostering individuals' development into autonomous, responsible, and ethically grounded citizens. In a similar vein, Zhao (2020) proposes a student-centered, purpose-driven learning model that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and a more profound understanding of oneself and

the world. These perspectives converge in calling for pedagogical models that view students not as passive recipients of knowledge, but as active agents in their own development, whose inner lives deserve as much attention as their external performance.

In light of these considerations, the spiritual dimension emerges as a vital yet frequently neglected component of a comprehensive education. Its development fosters introspection, ethical discernment, and compassionate relationships (de Souza, 2006), all of which are indispensable in facing the ecological, social, and existential crises of the 21st century. The reimagining of the educational paradigm to include spirituality in a manner that is respectful, non-dogmatic, and inclusive has been demonstrated to enrich the learning process. Furthermore, this approach has been shown to strengthen the capacity of schools to form individuals who are whole, wise, and capable of contributing to the common good.

This change necessitates an ethical commitment and a political will to recognize cultural and religious diversity not as an obstacle, but as an educational asset. In the contemporary era, educational institutions are compelled to evolve in order to meet the complex challenges posed by pluralistic and multicultural societies. In the contemporary globalized world, characterized by increasing cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic and worldview diversity, there is an increasing responsibility on the part of educational institutions to do more than simply transmit knowledge. In addition, they are expected to promote social cohesion, facilitate intercultural dialogue and instill the ethical foundations of democratic life. In this context, it is imperative that education moves beyond homogenizing models and develops inclusive pedagogies that allow all students to find recognition, voice, and a sense of belonging.

### *Challenges within education*

A significant challenge confronting contemporary societies is the need to harmonize diversity with shared values, thereby cultivating a respectful environment that acknowledges and values diversity without eliminating differences. As Banks (2008) contends, multicultural education must transcend superficial celebrations of diversity to address issues of equity, justice, and identity in a meaningful way. Furthermore, students must be equipped not only with cognitive tools, but with moral, emotional, and spiritual competencies that help them navigate the complexities of pluralism with empathy, critical thinking, and openness. This is of particular importance when considering the role of schools in shaping the citizens of tomorrow—individuals capable of engaging with others across lines of difference in constructive, peaceful, and ethically grounded ways.

Taylor (2011) posits that one of the fundamental objectives of education in pluralistic societies should be the cultivation of a shared moral space, wherein diverse traditions can coexist without domination or relativism. This necessitates that educators cultivate a profound degree of intercultural sensitivity and meticulously craft pedagogical frameworks that not only incorporate, but also foster, spiritual and existential inquiries—inquiries that are frequently marginalized within conventional curricula. If education is to be genuinely transformative and socially relevant, it must mirror the diversity of its student body and prepare them to establish inclusive and humane communities.

Another critical challenge lies in language diversity and communication. In pluralistic societies, linguistic plurality presents challenges that extend beyond mere inclusion, as educational institutions are compelled to address the discrepancy between the home languages of students and the dominant language of instruction. Cummins (2001) underscores the significance of recognizing students' linguistic identities in educational settings, cautioning that disregarding linguistic diversity can lead to academic underachievement and cultural disconnection. Consequently, educational institutions are obligated to foster multilingual environments, wherein students' native languages are not perceived as impediments but as assets that enhance the educational experience and promote a more egalitarian educational paradigm.

A further challenge stems from the presence of implicit biases and structural inequalities that may persist within educational institutions. These biases can manifest in various aspects of the educational environment, including curriculum content, teacher expectations, and disciplinary practices. These biases often result in the marginalization of minority or non-dominant cultural groups within the educational system. As Gay (2010) contends, the intentional development of culturally responsive pedagogy is imperative to counteract these inequities and ensure that all students are valued and supported. Addressing these hidden curricula necessitates not only awareness but also active policy and curricular reform aimed at dismantling discriminatory practices and fostering equity.

In this context, the pedagogical proposal set forth in this work acquires even greater relevance. It advocates, following Mahmoudi's et al. (2012) paradigm, for an educational model that is inclusive, holistic, and ethically grounded. This model acknowledges the spiritual dimension as a space for introspection, dialogue, and human connection. By recognizing diversity not as a threat but as a catalyst for mutual growth, this approach provides students with the emotional, cognitive, and ethical tools necessary to engage meaningfully with others in a complex and interdependent world. In the context of pluralistic societies, education must evolve beyond its conventional limitations to cultivate a more profound sense of shared humanity.

The structure of this thesis has been meticulously designed to offer a progressive, coherent, and well-founded overview of the study of the development of spirituality in early childhood and primary education. Subsequent to the preliminary synopsis, the reader will encounter an introductory section that addresses the state of the art and establishes the general theoretical framework underpinning the research approach. In the following section, the general and specific objectives are presented, with a subsequent breakdown according to the three studies that comprise the compendium of articles. The general methodology of the thesis is then outlined, highlighting the complementarity of approaches and justifying the use of different methodological designs in each article (theoretical, quantitative, and mixed) depending on the research questions posed. In the following section, a concise overview of the three articles is provided, encompassing their objectives, methodologies, and salient conclusions. In the following section, the articles that comprise the primary body of this study are presented in their complete form. The thesis concludes with a section entitled "Conclusions," in which the findings and their contribution to the field of education are reflected upon. This is followed by a complete list of bibliographic references that were utilized throughout the project.

## *Theoretical basis*

### *Hyperconnectivity or disconnection?*

In contemporary society, characterized by hyperconnectivity, digital saturation, and the exponential rise of artificial intelligence, there is a growing imperative to pause and engage in critical introspection about what it means to be human. The proliferation of algorithms capable of simulating cognitive tasks—ranging from content generation to decision-making—raises not only technological and ethical questions, but also existential ones. As Rosa (2019) contends, the rapid tempo of contemporary life and pervasive connectivity have the potential to diminish opportunities for introspection, solitude, and depth—conditions that are indispensable for fostering interiority and meaning. In this context, education plays a crucial role in preserving and nurturing the human capacity for self-awareness, moral judgment, and spiritual depth. These elements cannot be replicated or replaced by machines.

As Floridi (2021) emphasizes, the digital age presents us with the challenge of reevaluating our ontological and epistemological categories, compelling us to discern between the processing of information and human understanding. In a similar vein, Han (2015) characterizes the contemporary epoch as one of "neuronal capitalism," a term denoting an environment marked by the perpetual pursuit of productivity, visibility, and connectivity. This pursuit, as argued by Han, leads to an erosion of the necessary space for contemplation, vulnerability, and authentic presence. The prevailing societal pressure to remain constantly engaged, stimulated, and optimized—particularly through the use of digital technologies—has been shown to hinder the development of the inner self and to disconnect individuals from experiences of silence, wonder, and transcendence.

Furthermore, Turkle (2017) has cautioned against the potential pitfalls of "being alone together," emphasizing that in an age of incessant digital interaction, the capacity to experience meaningful solitude—a prerequisite for spiritual reflection—has been eroded. For children and adolescents growing up in such an environment, this disconnection from interiority is particularly concerning, as their developmental trajectory increasingly intertwines with external stimulation and algorithmic validation. Research conducted by Allaste and Waechter (2025) underscores the significance of critical digital literacy and reflective pedagogies in empowering young individuals to critically examine the technologies they utilize. These pedagogies are designed to foster environments conducive to identity formation and existential reflection.

Conversely, Biesta (2020) offers a counterargument, cautioning against the reduction of education to mere functionality or competence. Instead, he advocates for the reaffirmation of the subject as an individual capable of engaging with the world in ethical and meaningful ways. In this scenario, the integration of the spiritual dimension in education is not a luxury, but rather a necessity. It encourages learners to engage in introspection and affirm their distinctiveness and shared humanity in a society undergoing rapid automation.

In light of these challenges, educational systems must reclaim their role not only as facilitators of cognitive development but as guardians of the human spirit. The cultivation of spiritual awareness

among students emerges as a pedagogical imperative—not to indoctrinate, but to establish the conditions conducive to inquiry, depth, and the pursuit of meaning, which algorithms are incapable of providing. It is only through such a comprehensive approach that education can adequately address the significant challenges posed by the hyperconnected era.

In the domain of education, the integration of digital tools, active methodologies, and innovative pedagogical strategies has emerged as a pivotal aspect for enhancing learning outcomes and aligning with the evolving demands and needs of students in a rapidly changing global context (Santos et al., 2024). This approach fosters dynamic and immediate learning environments, aligning with the societal expectations and demands for continuous adaptation and innovation in educational practices.

In the pursuit of the renowned "holistic development" of students, as articulated by the 18th-century pedagogue Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi when he spoke of the education of the three elements: head, heart, and hand (*Herz, Kopf, Hand*), referring to these aspects as points of view of the same and unique humanity (Soëtard, 1983), the majority of human dimensions are cultivated: cognitive, physical, emotional, ethical, and so forth. A frequently overlooked aspect of human development is the spiritual dimension.

### *Spirituality in the Spanish context*

This dimension has historically been equated with religious education, particularly within the context of the Catholic Church in Spain. The comprehension and pedagogical incorporation of spirituality in the Spanish context must be understood in relation to the historical, cultural, and religious environment that has shaped its identity. For centuries, Catholicism has exerted a dominant influence on Spanish society, not only in religious practice but also in education, politics, and social values (Griera, 2007). This long-standing tradition has profoundly influenced the conceptualization of spirituality within the frameworks, symbols, and narratives of Catholic doctrine.

In the aftermath of the Concordat agreements between Spain and the Vatican, particularly the 1979 Agreement on Education and Cultural Affairs, the Catholic Church maintained a privileged position in shaping the educational system. Despite the stipulations within the Spanish Constitution of 1978 that guarantee religious freedom and the principle of state neutrality, Catholicism maintains a prominent position in numerous public and private educational institutions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of the Catholic religion, which is an elective subject in the national curriculum, designed and overseen by the Spanish Episcopal Conference. In this particular subject, spirituality is explicitly referenced and addressed. This means that any formal development of the spiritual dimension in education remains structurally tied to a denominational framework.

Consequently, the prevailing paradigm for nurturing students' spiritual dimension in Spain is inextricably linked to Catholic teachings. This encompasses theological content, sacramental language, and religious practices that do not necessarily align with a comprehensive or non-denominational conception of spirituality. Consequently, the concept is frequently associated with

religiosity or religious instruction, thereby leaving minimal space for secular, intercultural, or pluralistic approaches that might resonate with students of diverse backgrounds or beliefs.

This context poses substantial challenges when endeavoring to propose an inclusive, educationally grounded, and developmentally appropriate approach to spirituality in schools. On the one hand, educators and policymakers may be reluctant to address spirituality beyond the bounds of religion for fear of overstepping legal or ideological boundaries. Conversely, secular educators may deliberately abstain from addressing this topic due to its perceived association with religious indoctrination or the ambiguity surrounding its pedagogical value.

However, this circumstance also presents an opportunity for redefinition and pedagogical innovation. A growing body of international literature supports a broader conceptualization of spirituality that transcends confessional boundaries and focuses on human development, self-awareness, connection, and meaning-making (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Hyde, 2008a; Mata-McMahon & Escarfuller, 2023; Adams, 2024). Within this theoretical framework, spirituality is conceptualized as a universal human dimension—distinct from but potentially intersecting with religiosity—that fosters students' moral, emotional, and existential development.

The redefinition also implies acknowledging the socio-political complexity of the Spanish educational landscape, in which debates about secularism, religious freedom, and cultural identity continue to shape policy and practice. Consequently, the development of pedagogical models that can accommodate spiritual development without imposing specific religious worldviews becomes imperative. This process entails the establishment of a common vocabulary and conceptual framework comprehensible and applicable to teachers from diverse backgrounds, irrespective of their personal convictions or the institutional characteristics of their educational institutions.

### *The language of spirituality*

This predicament presents substantial challenges in the domains of inclusion, equity, and freedom of conscience, particularly within a society that is undergoing rapid diversification and secularization (Davie, 2023). As Gellel (2018) observes, one of the most persistent obstacles in education is the limited use and understanding of spiritual languages, which are often confined to religious vocabularies inaccessible to many students. These symbolic systems, while inherently rich and meaningful within their own traditions, have the potential to act as barriers to spiritual engagement when students are unfamiliar with their codes or excluded from the communities in which those meanings are transmitted.

According to Gellel, the language of spirituality is expressed through symbols, rituals, narratives, artistic forms, and contemplative experiences that offer access to deeper levels of meaning, connection, and transcendence. However, it is important to note that these languages are the products of cultural construction and historical context, and as such, they are not universally shared. In educational environments where religious language is the sole vehicle for spiritual expression—such as in the Catholic curriculum—students who lack prior exposure to this symbolic system may struggle to connect meaningfully with what is being taught. Unless educators are

intentional about cultivating symbolic literacy and fostering inclusive pedagogies, the risk is that spirituality becomes exclusively framed through a theological lens, thereby losing its broader human dimension.

Furthermore, spirituality, as a fundamental aspect of the human experience, precedes religious affiliation (de Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012). These inclinations, as pointed out by Heland-Kurzak (2024), manifest during early childhood, emerging through wonder, awe, care, and a search for meaning. However, these expressions frequently go unrecognized within mainstream schooling settings unless they align with formal religious instruction. Consequently, a significant pedagogical challenge in Spain is the development of curricular approaches that facilitate the cultivation of the spiritual dimension across disciplines, independent of confessional content, and in ways that affirm students' diverse worldviews. This expanded understanding of spirituality aims to create a space for all students, including those who are believers, agnostics, and adherents of other faiths, to explore profound questions of identity, purpose, and connection within a respectful and dialogical environment. It is imperative for the Spanish education system to decouple spirituality from a rigidly Catholic framework in order to address the plural realities of its student body and fulfill its mission of supporting the comprehensive development of all learners.

This imprecise attribution has resulted in a conspicuous absence of both conceptual and pedagogical frameworks, a gap that this thesis seeks to address. While religiosity encompasses a spiritual dimension, the conceptualization employed in this study comprehends spirituality as a facet that can be nurtured by adherents of all religious and non-religious persuasions and that is present in any person regardless of culture and age (Wills, 2025). This phenomenon has been previously delineated by Evdokimov (2002) using, however, the concept of interiority:

There are people who have a very rich interior path, but not a religious one [...] It can therefore be seen from these two forms of life, "religious" and "interior", that the former always involves a relationship of dependence on a transcendent and personal Absolute, and that the latter is autonomous and achieves its depth in the immanence of its own psychic richness (p. 59).

#### *Misconceptions of spirituality: a need for a conceptualization*

Despite the mounting interest in a holistic education that encompasses not only cognitive dimensions but also emotional, ethical, and spiritual facets, academic literature on spiritual development in minors remains scarce, conceptually fragmented, and methodologically inconsistent, which presents a significant challenge for educators and researchers alike. A cursory examination of the term "spiritual development in children" on Google Scholar elucidates this phenomenon. While a plethora of studies emerge, they predominantly fall into three loosely interconnected categories. Firstly, a considerable portion of the text is dedicated to the psychological dimensions, establishing a correlation between spirituality and emotional well-being, cognitive processes, and identity formation (e.g., King & Boyatzis, 2015). Secondly, there is a substantial body of literature grounded in developmental psychology, particularly in the context of adolescence, which frequently examines spirituality as a component of moral or

character development. A considerable number of works adopt a religious or theological perspective, situating spiritual growth within confessional frameworks and faith-based practices. This absence of a cohesive theoretical framework gives rise to conceptual ambiguity and curtails the practical applicability of findings, particularly within secular or pluralistic educational contexts.

This conceptual disorder contributes to the persistent equivocation between spirituality and religiosity, as noted by Hyde (2008a) and others, and hinders the creation of pedagogical frameworks that are both inclusive and educationally grounded. The present thesis aims precisely to respond to this gap by proposing a clear, operational, and educationally relevant definition of spirituality, as well as tools to integrate it into formal education without depending on religious affiliation. In this sense, the present research contributes not only to the development of the field's theoretical framework, but also to the systematization of a fragmented field, rendering it pedagogically meaningful and ethically applicable.

As pointed above, considerable number of extant studies have approached this dimension from a religious perspective, explicitly linking it to the transmission of beliefs, doctrines, or confessional practices. For many years, this association has impeded the integration of spirituality into non-religious or pluralistic school environments, leading to conceptual confusion and institutional resistance. Consequently, a substantial gap exists in the research exploring childhood spirituality as an autonomous human dimension (Mata-McMahon, 2016), characterized by its openness to experience, meaning, interiority, and connection with others, independent of any specific religious framework. This dearth of lucid, non-denominational, and empirically substantiated pedagogical approaches signifies a substantial gap, particularly within the domain of compulsory education. This thesis endeavors to address this lacuna by means of an operational conceptualization, an analysis of teachers' perceptions, and the proposal of pedagogical guidelines that respect the cultural and spiritual diversity of students.

### *Spirituality and the brain*

This spiritual dimension, much like the other dimensions of the human being, exerts a profound influence on the brain, manifesting in diverse ways. Its practice and development have the capacity to impact the neural structure in a long-term manner. Newberg et al. (2017), for instance, emphasize in their study a substantial decrease in dopamine transporter binding in the basal ganglia (which directly impact movement and motivation) and a considerable decrease in serotonin transporter binding in the midbrain (which affects mood) of participants of a 7-day intensive spiritual retreat. Moreover, a body of research has identified structural changes in the brain, emotional regulation, attention, and self-awareness in individuals engaging in meditation, mindfulness, compassion, or silence, which are commonly associated with the development of spirituality (Tang et al., 2015).

Recent empirical evidence supports the idea that contemplative and spiritually aligned practices—such as mindfulness, compassion, and self-awareness training—can lead to measurable changes in the brain, particularly in areas associated with executive functioning and socioemotional skills. Flook et al. (2025), in a study involving primary school students, demonstrated that an eight-week

mindfulness training program significantly enhanced children's cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and emotional regulation. Using both behavioral assessments and neuroimaging techniques, the study revealed increased activation in the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex—regions directly associated with attention, impulse control, and empathy. These findings underscore the neurological foundations of practices traditionally linked with spiritual development, highlighting how structured contemplative experiences can foster internal capacities that are foundational not only to learning but also to prosocial behavior and ethical sensitivity. While the study focused on mindfulness in a secular form, the underlying mechanisms—introspective awareness, attentional grounding, and emotional balance—resonate with broader spiritual practices across traditions, reinforcing the importance of considering these approaches within holistic educational models.

Nevertheless, while neuroscience provides significant insights into the brain's response to spiritual engagement, it is imperative to avoid reducing spirituality to its neurological correlates alone. The spiritual dimension, by its very nature, addresses profound existential questions, the pursuit of meaning, and the capacity to transcend the self. Consequently, its complete capture through functional imaging or neurochemical markers is not feasible. Wintering et al. (2017) caution that while their study highlights neurobiological effects of intensive spiritual retreats, these changes are embedded in broader human experiences involving belief systems, symbolic language, community belonging, and transformative narratives.

A growing body of literature has warned against what is often termed "neurocentrism," the tendency to conflate the human experience with brain activity, neglecting the rich phenomenological and cultural layers of consciousness and identity (Kiverstein & Miller, 2015). When applied to spirituality, this reductionist stance has the potential to obfuscate its essence by interpreting transcendence, moral intuition, or the search for meaning merely as patterns of neural firing. Such an approach, however, risks neutralizing the ontological and ethical depth of spiritual experience. Spiritual experience involves dimensions of awe, mystery, suffering, purpose, and connection that resist empirical quantification. Therefore, the spiritual dimension must be acknowledged as a complex interplay between biology, personal narrative, cultural context, and metaphysical inquiry.

However, acknowledging the limitations of a purely neurological perspective does not negate the value of understanding how spiritual practices influence brain development, especially in children. A substantial body of research has emerged in support of the notion that regular engagement in contemplative or spiritual activities—such as mindfulness, meditation, or compassion practices—can foster brain plasticity, enhance executive functions, and promote emotional regulation (Teper et al., 2013; Teper & Inzlicht, 2013; Cásedas et al., 2020; Calderone et al., 2024; Flook et al., 2025). From an educational perspective, the neuroscientific evidence presented here lends substantial support to the integration of these practices into pedagogical approaches. These practices have the potential to enhance students' focus, empathy, and self-awareness, which are fundamental competencies for holistic learning.

## *Children's Spirituality*

In this context, it becomes imperative to adopt a dual perspective that acknowledges the transformative, transcendent, and ethical dimensions of spirituality while also recognizing the tangible neurological and educational benefits of its cultivation. This integrated approach prevents oversimplification while offering a solid foundation to advocate for spiritual development as part of a comprehensive educational model. Spirituality in education must be comprehended not solely as a conduit to neural optimization, but also as a profoundly humanizing force capable of molding individuals who are reflective, connected, and ethically grounded.

This understanding of spirituality, coupled with the potential ramifications of cultivating this facet from an early age, as posited by Robinson et al. (2025), underscores the necessity for its development during childhood. This assertion is further substantiated by its interconnection with not only the brain but also other dimensions. Although measuring this development in children's brains is more complex, there is ample evidence from multiple studies that this type of practice influences various areas of child development. For instance, Zelazo and Lyons (2012) have indicated that the implementation of mindfulness practices in early childhood education has the potential to promote the development of self-regulation by exerting influence on downstream processes and by attenuating upstream influences, such as anxiety, stress, and curiosity. The review conducted by Greenberg and Harris (2011) also indicated that the practice of mindfulness could have a positive impact on children's resilience, and meditation and yoga programs were associated with multiple benefits in children's development. Recent studies suggest that mindfulness programs in early childhood education not only foster resilience but also have a significant impact on the development of social and emotional skills, behavioral and emotional regulation, recognition and awareness of emotional health and well-being, and contribution to long-term outcomes for children (Duff, 2024). Moreover, the implementation of a spiritual development program within the context of early childhood education has been observed to engender an enhancement in the creativity of children (Pandya, 2024).

Furthermore, recent research emphasizes that capacities for spirituality and compassionate morality do not emerge spontaneously in adulthood; rather, they are shaped from the earliest years of life, during a stage of heightened brain plasticity and openness to experience (Tarsha & Narváez, 2022). Consequently, the period of early childhood and primary education is considered a privileged time to establish the foundations for these dispositions. This can be achieved through deliberate educational practices that prioritize introspection, ethical reflection, and connection with others and with the world. Therefore, this dimension is regarded as a critical component of an individual's development, and as with the other dimensions, it should be nurtured in educational institutions as part of their holistic development (Robinson, 2019). In this sense, the proposal is original and innovative, due to its non-religious approach to this dimension in the Spanish educational context.

In order to address the overarching objective of integrating the spiritual dimension into early childhood and primary education, it is crucial to examine how this dimension is perceived and understood by educators, who play a decisive role in its implementation in the classroom.

Research has demonstrated that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and prior experiences exert a significant influence on their pedagogical decisions, including the inclusion (or exclusion) of spiritual, ethical, and emotional content in educational practice (de Souza et al., 2016). However, despite the growing interest in holistic approaches to education, the academic literature on spiritual development in children remains conceptually fragmented and empirically underexplored, particularly in non-confessional or secular educational settings (Hyde, 2008; Miller & Athan, 2020).

This context forms the foundation for the second study included in this thesis, which investigates how educators conceptualize spirituality and whether personal or professional variables (such as gender, teaching stage, religious identity, leadership roles, or perception of learning outcomes) affect their views on its relevance and applicability. The research questions guiding this study are aligned with the overall objectives of the thesis. Specifically, they seek to diagnose the current landscape in order to identify both obstacles and opportunities for implementing the spiritual dimension in educational practice. Consequently, they make a direct contribution to the development of pedagogical proposals in the third phase of the research. The present investigation seeks to bridge the gap between abstract definitions of spirituality and the realities of classroom practice. It does so by linking empirical insight with theoretical clarity. This endeavor is particularly timely and relevant, as it responds to a need increasingly voiced in both academic and professional circles.

This thesis aligns with Tagore's (2012) perspective by emphasizing the spiritual dimension as a vital catalyst for unleashing the optimal potential of the human being. This optimal potential encompasses the capacity to discern meaning, confront adversity with fortitude, nurture empathy, and uphold ethical principles even in times of uncertainty.

To address this issue comprehensively, the thesis is structured in three complementary studies that follow a logical sequence: from the theoretical conceptualization, through the analysis of teaching beliefs, to the proposal of concrete pedagogical guidelines.

The first study is theoretical in nature and focuses on the conceptualization of spirituality, detaching it from its traditional exclusive association with religion. A broad and operational definition is proposed, distinguishing intrapersonal, relational, and transcendental dimensions. This definition provides a clear conceptual framework for its educational approach. The second study employs a quantitative empirical approach to explore the perceptions and beliefs of Spanish teachers about spirituality. A validated questionnaire was administered to nearly 500 teachers to identify the general acceptance of its importance, as well as the conceptual confusions and barriers to its implementation. The results revealed the need for training and institutional support. The third study, of a mixed (quantitative-qualitative) nature, integrates a questionnaire and focus groups to propose concrete pedagogical guidelines. The formulation of recommendations to plan, implement, and evaluate activities that cultivate spirituality in a structured yet flexible manner in the classroom is predicated on an analysis of real teaching experiences. Thus, the three studies are articulated as complementary phases of a unified project, progressing from theoretical foundations to practical applications to facilitate the integration of the spiritual dimension in school

education in a meticulous and considerate manner, embracing diversity.

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this doctoral thesis is to examine a fundamental human dimension that is infrequently addressed in formal education: spirituality. In an era marked by an imperative for comprehensive education that addresses not only cognitive but also emotional, ethical, and existential dimensions, there is an urgent need to provide theoretical frameworks, empirical diagnoses, and pedagogical proposals that facilitate the integration of these dimensions in a manner that is both respectful and inclusive during the early stages of educational development. The overarching objective of this research is to contribute to the integration of the spiritual dimension into early childhood and primary education. This objective will be accomplished through a three-phase methodological approach. The first phase will entail rigorous and up-to-date conceptual clarification. The second phase will entail the analysis of teachers' perceptions and beliefs. The third and final phase will entail the design of specific pedagogical guidelines that can be applied in the classroom.

In order to accomplish the proposed overall objective, a series of specific objectives have been meticulously designed and established for each of the articles produced.

### 1. First article – Conceptual

- Analyze relevant international academic literature to identify how the spiritual dimension in childhood has been defined and addressed from non-denominational approaches.
- Propose an operational and inclusive definition of spirituality that allows for its pedagogical approach in diverse and secular educational contexts.

### 2. Second article – Quantitative study

- Explore the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of early childhood and elementary school teachers regarding spirituality in school.
- Identify possible conceptual, educational, or institutional barriers that hinder its inclusion in educational practice.

### 3. Third article – Mixed study and pedagogical proposal

- Collect evidence on real experiences of spiritual development in the classroom through quantitative and qualitative data.
- Develop a set of applicable and adaptable pedagogical guidelines to guide teachers in their work on the spiritual dimension from a cross-curricular, respectful, and non-denominational approach.

## METHOD

The methodological design of this thesis is grounded in a multi-method approach, conceived as one of its central strengths. This choice stems from the intricate and multifaceted character of the research object—spirituality in educational contexts—which defies comprehensive encapsulation within a solitary paradigm. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasize, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data through mixed methods enables a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena. In the domain of educational research, particularly in the context of addressing under-explored or abstract constructs such as spirituality, methodological complementarity is imperative for ensuring both conceptual clarity and empirical validity (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The initial phase of the research employs a theoretical-conceptual design, substantiated by the dearth of a cohesive or operationalizable definition of spirituality in secular educational literature. A comprehensive narrative review of the most relevant international academic literature was conducted, with an emphasis on non-denominational frameworks. This review had two objectives. First, it served to map existing approaches. Second, it identified semantic ambiguities and conceptual gaps. Ultimately, this enabled the formulation of an inclusive, applicable, and pedagogically grounded definition of spirituality. As Boote and Beile (2005) contend, conceptual clarity is an indispensable prerequisite for valid empirical inquiry, particularly in the context of complex constructs.

The second phase of the study is quantitative in nature and involves the development and validation of an ad hoc questionnaire (Appendix 1). This questionnaire is administered to a large sample of early childhood and primary education teachers in Spain. This methodological framework enables the assessment of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions concerning the integration of spirituality in educational practice. The employment of quantitative methodologies in this setting confers numerous benefits, including the capacity to conduct statistical comparisons across diverse groups, the identification of patterns and barriers, and the possibility of deriving inferences with a certain degree of generalizability. The survey design adhered to the strict validity and reliability criteria established by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018).

The third article presents a mixed-methods design, integrating a quantitative-descriptive phase with a qualitative phase based on thematic analysis of data obtained through focus groups. The selection of focus groups as the research method was predicated on their capacity to engender dynamic interaction among participants, thereby facilitating the emergence of shared meanings and reflective dialogue (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This phase facilitated the acquisition of experiential knowledge from practicing teachers, with a focus on real classroom scenarios in which the spiritual dimension was addressed, whether intentionally or otherwise. Thematic analysis was selected due to its capacity for identifying patterns of meaning within participants' narratives while maintaining fidelity to their language and context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The selection of these methods was meticulous, with each method chosen to address the specific research questions and objectives delineated in the thesis. In addition, given the intricacy and multidimensionality of spirituality, particularly when approached from a non-denominational and

pedagogical perspective, the utilization of a solitary methodological framework would have been susceptible to producing partial or reductive conclusions. The integration of conceptual analysis, large-scale quantitative data, and rich qualitative narratives ensures triangulation and enhances the credibility, depth, and applicability of the findings. By triangulating conceptual clarity, empirical breadth, and experiential depth, the thesis offers a comprehensive and coherent framework for understanding and implementing spiritual development in education. The complementarity between methods serves to reinforce the conclusions and enhance their practical and theoretical value for future research and educational policy.

Given that the specific methodology of each study is detailed in the respective articles that comprise the thesis, this section is limited to highlighting the coherence and complementarity between designs, underlining their essential role in approaching the phenomenon from a holistic and applied perspective.

Despite the theoretical framework employed in this study, which advocates for a non-denominational and inclusive approach to spirituality, the empirical fieldwork was conducted with teachers working in Catholic educational settings. This circumstance, acknowledged as a limitation in the final section of the thesis, requires further elucidation in methodological terms.

Collaborating with participants from Catholic schools presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, it is true that teachers within these environments may hold a confessional or faith-based understanding of spirituality, shaped by the religious identity of their institutions. This potential introduction of bias in their responses may be especially evident in cases of conflation of spirituality with religious doctrine or practice. Conversely, the decision to include this population was intentional and strategic. Catholic schools in Spain frequently provide more space—both discursively and structurally—for spiritual discourse, rendering them a suitable point of departure for exploring perceptions, experiences, and pedagogical strategies related to spirituality in education.

While the participating schools were identified as Catholic institutions, it is crucial to emphasize that the teachers surveyed were not necessarily Catholic themselves. Indeed, the responses reflected a notable diversity of beliefs and spiritual sensitivities, which enriched the findings and demonstrated the heterogeneity even within confessional school environments. This internal pluralism indicates that spiritual discourse is not confined to institutional religious doctrine, but rather intersects with personal experiences, philosophical worldviews, and humanistic values. Consequently, the study benefited from a wider range of perspectives than might be expected in a homogenous religious setting.

However, the religious identity of the institutions may have influenced participants' familiarity with certain conceptual or linguistic frameworks surrounding spirituality. Despite the explicit inclusion and non-theological nature of the terminology employed in both the questionnaire and the focus group protocols, it is possible that many teachers may have unconsciously drawn upon religious references or confessional connotations due to their prior exposure. This familiarity can be regarded as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it has the potential to bias interpretations by associating spirituality too closely with religion; on the other hand, it enabled respondents to

engage more readily and deeply with questions related to transcendence, meaning, and ethical reflection. This dynamic underscores the necessity for a meticulous examination of the manner in which language, context, and institutional culture influence perceptions of spirituality in educational settings.

Nevertheless, the design of the study—particularly the language used in the questionnaires and interviews—was meticulously devised to circumvent theological or denominational terminology, thereby encouraging participants to reflect beyond explicitly religious frameworks. Furthermore, the analysis meticulously examined the tensions and overlaps between religious and non-religious interpretations of spirituality. This dynamic enriched the findings and revealed conceptual ambiguities that are precisely part of the problem this research aims to address.

Future research is necessary in secular or pluralistic school settings, where the inclusion of spiritual dimensions may be approached in a variety of ways or even resisted. However, this preliminary empirical step offers a valuable insight into how spirituality is perceived and enacted in real educational contexts, even when shaped by religious affiliation. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for expanding the conversation toward broader, more inclusive frameworks.

## ARTICLES

The following three articles comprise the foundation of this doctoral thesis. Each of these phases is intended to address a specific aspect of the overarching objective, which is divided into three sections. The first section is concerned with the conceptualization of the project. The second section involves the empirical diagnosis of the subject matter. The third and final section presents an applied pedagogical proposal. Despite their autonomy in structure and methodological approach, the articles are designed as interdependent components of a unified research project, exhibiting a coherent internal logic that progresses systematically. The initial article provides a conceptual elucidation of spirituality from an inclusive and non-denominational standpoint. The second study offers a quantitative analysis of teachers' perceptions of this dimension in the Spanish educational context. The third section of the text offers a balanced approach, presenting specific pedagogical guidelines for integrating the concept into the classroom setting. When considered as a whole, these works provide a substantial contribution, both theoretical and practical, to the discourse on comprehensive education in the early childhood and primary stages.

### **1. First article: Approaching a conceptualization of the spiritual dimension: the need for its development from the initial stages of a person's formation**

#### **Article details**

Author: Burgueño López, Jorge; Torre Puente, Juan Carlos; Urosa Sanz, Belén

Title: Approaching a conceptualisation of the spiritual dimension: the need for its development from the initial stages of a person's formation

Journal: International Studies in Catholic Education

Publisher: Routledge (Taylor & Francis)

Year of publication: 2024

Impact indicators: SJR Q1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2024.2387690>

This article addresses the need for a rigorous, inclusive, and pedagogically operational conceptualization of the spiritual dimension, especially in the context of early childhood and primary education. A critical review of the international literature reveals that spirituality has been defined in multiple ways. This analysis highlights the lack of terminological consensus and the frequent confusion of spirituality with institutional religiosity.

The article posits a conceptualization of spirituality as a universal human dimension, comprising intrapersonal (consciousness and focusing), relational (need for linkage with others and connection with nature), and transcendental (sense of mystery, wonder and awe, connection with a higher power and search for meaning and purpose) components. The argument is made that this dimension should be cultivated from the early years of life, due to its impact on the ethical, emotional, and social development of the child.

The text underscores the pressing necessity to transcend educational models that disregard or diminish this dimension, proposing its incorporation into a comprehensive and humanizing education. The article concludes by establishing the theoretical foundation for future research. In this research, teachers' perceptions will be explored and specific pedagogical strategies will be designed to integrate spirituality in a cross-cutting, non-denominational, and diversity-friendly manner.

## **2. Second article: Perceptions of, and beliefs about spirituality in Spanish Primary and Early Education Teachers**

### **Article details**

Author: Burgueño López, Jorge; Torre Puente, Juan Carlos; Urosa Sanz, Belén

Title: Perceptions of, and beliefs about spirituality in Spanish Primary and Early Education Teachers

Journal: British Journal of Religious Education

Publisher: Routledge (Taylor & Francis)

Year of publication: 2025

Impact indicators: SJR Q1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2025.2492639>

This article presents a quantitative study on the perceptions and beliefs of early childhood and primary school teachers in Spain regarding spirituality in the educational context. A structured questionnaire was administered to 488 teachers in Catholic schools, yielding the desired data. The study analyzes the participants' level of agreement with various statements related to spirituality, their perception of the relationship between this dimension and the comprehensive development of students, and the barriers to its inclusion in educational practice.

The findings suggest that, while most teachers acknowledge the significance of spirituality in promoting students' personal and ethical development, there are also conceptual confusions (reductive associations with religiosity), along with institutional and training constraints. A significant number of educators have expressed a lack of preparation to incorporate this dimension into their instructional practice, or a sense of uncertainty regarding its integration without resorting to confessional approaches.

The article's conclusion underscores the necessity for specialized teacher training and regulatory support, facilitating the integration of spirituality in a secular, pedagogical, and cross-curricular manner. Moreover, these findings underscore the necessity of formulating distinct pedagogical guidelines, a goal that is pursued in the third article of this thesis compendium.

### **3. Third article: Pedagogical guidelines for developing the spiritual dimension in early childhood and primary education**

#### **Article details**

Author: Burgueño López, Jorge; Torre Puente, Juan Carlos; Urosa Sanz, Belén

Title: Pedagogical guidelines for developing the spiritual dimension in early childhood and primary education

Publisher: Routledge (Taylor & Francis)

Year of publication: 2025

Impact indicators: SJR Q2

This third article serves as a culmination of the research endeavor presented in the thesis, offering a specific proposal for pedagogical guidelines that pertain to the integration of spirituality in early childhood and primary education. The present study utilizes a mixed research design, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, to collect the voices and experiences of teachers who are currently exploring this dimension in their classrooms. The study then analyzes the resources, strategies, and perceived difficulties employed by these teachers.

In the quantitative phase, a questionnaire was administered with items related to educational practice and the degree of integration of spirituality. The qualitative phase was developed through interviews and focus groups. The findings indicate a notable level of teacher motivation to incorporate this dimension, particularly through activities involving introspection, reflection, connection with nature, and the promotion of values such as empathy and gratitude.

The article proposes a set of structured pedagogical guidelines, including activities adapted to each stage, didactic criteria for the design of meaningful experiences, recommendations for formative assessment and teacher training, and guidelines for integrating spirituality in a cross-curricular and non-denominational way. The present proposal is founded upon the conceptual framework developed in the initial article and addresses the needs identified in the subsequent article, thereby completing the research cycle that underlies this thesis.

## Statement of Authorship

I, Jorge Burgueño López, hereby declare that I am the principal and leading author of the three academic articles presented in this doctoral dissertation. I have been solely responsible for the design of the studies, the elaboration of the theoretical frameworks, the development of the methodology, the data collection and analysis, and the writing of the final manuscripts, including the discussion and conclusions.

The co-authors who appear in the published articles have contributed significantly through in-depth revisions, methodological advice, conceptual clarifications, and editorial improvements. Their support has been instrumental in enhancing the academic rigor of each text and ensuring the coherence of the overall structure. However, all core elements of authorship—content creation, argumentation, and interpretation—have been carried out under my direction and authorship responsibility.

This declaration is made in accordance with the authorship policies of the corresponding journals and the ethical standards required for doctoral research. The statement is supported by my thesis supervisors and all listed co-authors.

## **APPROACHING A CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION: THE NEED FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT FROM THE INITIAL STAGES OF A PERSON'S FORMATION.**

### **Abstract**

This article aims to reconceptualise the term 'Spirituality' from a non-religious perspective. A bibliographical review of the main authors and currents that attempt to define the concept has been carried out, as well as a categorisation of the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the term. To this end, a classification has been made in table format based on the literature review. The need for spirituality has also been based on the impact that spiritual experiences have on the individual, especially on the changes that occur in the brain. The main conclusions of the article point to the need to develop and nurture the spiritual dimensions of human beings, even from the earliest stages of development, since the changes produced by such experiences can have an impact on the emotional and cognitive processes that are part of the learning process.

**Keywords:** spirituality; education; spiritual education; spiritual experiences

### **Introduction**

The term 'spirituality' has been defined and reinterpreted over time from multiple perspectives. There are several currents that try to conceptualise an aspect that, due to its singularity, is tremendously complex and, therefore, to reach a consensus about its definition. Therefore, the main aim of this theoretical study would be to arrive at a more precise definition of this concept as opposed to the set of definitions that usually exist in the educational field and that hinder the implementation of projects for nurturing and develop spirituality in schools, because as noted by Adams et al. (2016), a universal consensus about what spirituality is would be impossible, but a more realistic alternative approach might be to offer, following the literature review, a rough conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

In order to carry out this literature review, the main textbooks of the last twenty years were selected and the journals with the highest impact on spirituality and religious education were chosen to search for papers with key words such as "definition" or "conceptualisation" of spirituality, "children's spirituality" (also "spirituality in childhood"), "dimensions of spirituality", "categories of spirituality" and "spirituality and education". "Conceptualisation review" was also added to the search, to add papers that may have conducted a literature review on existing perspectives on spirituality. Finally, in order to support the conceptualisation of this dimension also in the biological part of the human being, the following search criteria have been added: "spiritual

experiences", "brain and spirituality", "meditation and brain", "mindfulness and brain" and "spirituality and mental health".

The review consisted of an exhaustive search of the main works in educational databases (ERIC) and in the field of psychology (Psycodoc) of the last twenty years, although it was decided to start the analysis of previous definitions and conceptualisations as they were considered the basis for what was developed later.

The main criteria for the inclusion of works and studies were the need for the paper to define the concept of spirituality in a context that is not necessarily religious, i.e. although it may be present, it should not be a condition. In fact, any work that has defined spirituality from an exclusively religious conception has been a criterion for exclusion. Also, studies related to educational aspects or the integral development of children, since the ultimate purpose of the study is to approach the conceptualisation of spirituality in order to show the need to nurture this dimension in schools.

The content of the review was therefore structured as follows: 1) identification and selection of different proposals for conceptualising spirituality, 2) revision of the proposals that have categorised or distinguished different dimensions or characteristics within spirituality, and 3) finally, the relation of this dimension to human biological processes (in terms of the impact it may have on the neuronal level and on personal well-being).

### ***Spirituality: a conceptualisation***

Although it is true that not so long ago spirituality was closely linked to religiosity (in most western cultures it still is) and, as Grajczonek (2012) points out, it hasn't been explored outside the religious dimension until fairly recently because it is difficult to fully understand the term without reference religiously-inspired ways of thinking (Franchi and Robinson, 2014); today this word refers to a reality that encompasses aspects of both religion itself and other fields such as psychology, philosophy, biology, etc.

The spiritual dimension is present in the thoughts of great minds who have consider it a fundamental part of human existence as rational, emotional and social beings. Tagore (2012, 18), for example, indicated the relevance of spiritual culture as opposed to material production as a sign of growth and progress of a society: 'Its value [that of progress] lies not in the multiplication of material goods but in spiritual fulfilment'. Maslow (1964) describes this dimension as a unity with all and the realization of oneself. Even in a mind as scientific as Einstein's, spirituality has an important role in human nature, as he points out on his letter to a girl who asked him a question about the possibility of believing in both science and religion (Calaprice, 2003, 86-87): 'Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science is convinced that some spirit manifests itself in the laws of nature, one that is far superior to that of man'.

So, as a dimension widely recognized as human, it is crucial to approach the concept and try to understand how spirituality develops and the impact of spiritual experiences on people taking into account the changes that the concept has undergone over time both socially and culturally (Rossiter, 2010). As it has been vastly defined and conceptualised, it is essential to start with a first classification of the different spiritualities. García de Castro (2021) separates spirituality into

two large differentiated blocks: immanent and transcendent spiritualities. Immanent spiritualities offer proposals of meaning based on what the person comes to desire, speaking of spirituality as a self-construction of personal, social or cultural meaning (Beck, 1992). This approach is defined by Roof (1993, 64) as follows: spirituality 'allows expression to the being that is within us; it has to do with feelings, with the power that comes from within, with knowing ourselves in the deepest sense'.

On the other hand, transcendent spiritualities are proposals of meaning that recognize a supernatural element as the central and constitutive axis of their identity. One of the main currents of transcendent spirituality defines it as a search for the sacred. It is a process through which people seek a discourse, hold on to and, when necessary, transform what they consider sacred in their lives (Hill and Pargament, 2003). In this sense, it points to the person as an active agent who engages with what he or she considers sacred or divine (Miller and Thoresen, 2003).

Beyond this classification and conceptualisation, there are other approaches to the concept of this dimension, like the perspective from the theory of multiple intelligences developed by Gardner (1983). Several authors have deepened the concept of intelligence, even adding some to Gardner's original eight, such as emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) popularized by Goleman (1995) or spiritual intelligence (Zohar and Marshall, 2000). The creators of this new conceptualisation of spirituality from the perspective of intelligence define it as that with which issues concerning values, or meaning, are faced and resolved. Thanks to it, it is possible to perform acts in broader, richer and more meaningful contexts, with the aim of determining that one life path may be more valuable than another.

While spirituality is a sense of higher consciousness and divine existence, SQ (Spiritual Intelligence) is related to the abilities to use divine aspects to enable goal attainment and problem solving. SQ is an inner ability, related to mind and spirit and their connections with the world (Samul, 2020). An ability, according to Ronel (2008), in development, so that human beings can evolve or devolve in their spiritual aspects throughout their existence. From this current derives a similar conceptualisation that understands spirituality as competence perceived as the ability to apply aspects of spiritual intelligence (Hodge, 2016; Martín-Sánchez et al., 2020; Muñoz-García, 2016; Young et al., 2002). However, while this perspective is too focused on cognitive and developmentalism, our conception is closer to that developed in Mata-McMahon's (2016) review, which concludes that the vision of children's spirituality would benefit from a more holistic and comprehensive view.

The perspective chosen for this review is largely based on the work of Hardy (1979) and the study of Robinson (1977), with more explicit references to the spiritual life of children. This definition received a great impetus in the Anglo-Saxon world in the 1990s (Beck, 1992; Beesley, 1993; Davies, 1998). Our conceptualisation is based, at first, in these authors who clearly separated the concept from the religious dimension, as it is showed to understand better these type of experiences of the students (Casson, 2013), and in some definitions and conceptualisations of the most relevant authors developing their research and work on children's spirituality in the last two decades, such as Hyde's (2008, 23), who points out: "spirituality can mean different things to

different people", agreeing with Eade (2003) and suggests that this dimension is an essential human trait. Also, de Souza (2009) views spirituality as a vital element of human development, particularly emphasizing its role within the context of relationality. And mainly on the understanding of children's spirituality of Hay and Nye (2006) who consider that spirituality in children has its origin in their own universal consciousness and is not only a cultural construct (linked to religious or cultural traditions), as they worked with children with different religious backgrounds and secular schools in the United Kingdom. Spirituality, according to Hay et al. (2006, 50) is a universal dimension in human beings, regardless of their formal religious beliefs or lack them. Therefore, spirituality is considered to be more 'innate' than learned, valuing it not so much as a product to be achieved, but rather as a process to be worked on and nurtured (Nye, 2019). Therefore, to cultivate it, it is necessary to stimulate children's awareness through appropriate activities, such as reflection, meditation and 'stillness', experience of interiority, etc. As part of this process, students are encouraged to 'keep an open mind', aided, for example, by the contemplation of optical illusions. That is, spiritual development can occur when students are provided with the opportunity to experience, create, investigate and enjoy things beneficial to the meaning and purpose of life (Moulin-Stozek, 2020). Although these studies contribute to give an in-depth view of children's spirituality and provide keys for teaching or generating adequate spaces for spiritual education, no research has been found that analyses to what extent these aspects of spiritual development are already being educated in Spanish schools in a cross-cutting manner. In this way, it will be possible to provide concrete strategies for spiritual development in schools based on the analysis of these results.

#### *Western, Eastern and African spiritualities, too many conceptualisations*

As it has been pointed out, spirituality is a term that has been defined in many different ways even in the same cultural environment. That is the main reason why we choose to work with an approach from a western cultural perspective. In Africa, for example, not only each country has a unique comprehension of this concept, but their spiritual traditions have also been transformed with the historical reality of colonization (Sefa Dei, 2002). Also, even if Eastern culture has had an impact on several ways of approaching spirituality on the Western society, it is impossible to generalize a model of the term in the Asian context and a deeper knowledge of their understanding of spirituality would become a separate study. And, as it is true that we will be mentioning some practices that are considered as 'spiritual' and they have their origins on Asia, such as meditation, yoga or mindfulness, and they are valid to measure some of the aspects of spirituality, they have been 'adopted' by Western culture and society to turn them into non-religious practices and they are understood and experienced differently because of the strong connections between religion and society in Eastern culture (Lau, 2021).

#### *Revision of the main categories of spirituality*

In order to become closer to the concept it is necessary to clarify the different categories of spirituality. There are authors such as Beck (1992) who gives a list of spiritual characteristics, with the belief that there is a spiritual dimension that is common to all human beings and that does not follow any religious or non-religious path: consciousness, breadth of perspective, holistic outlook,

integration (body, mind and spirit), capacity for wonder, gratitude, hopefulness, courage, energy, detachment, acceptance, love and gentleness.

Davies (1998, 134), on the other hand, makes a list of characteristics to promote spiritual development in schools: self-esteem, relationships with others, their own personal beliefs, their own personal values, appreciation of the beliefs and values of others, a sense of awe, mystery and wonder, individual creativity, an awareness of the fundamental questions of life, the reflection on the meaning and purpose of life and appropriate responses to life’s challenging experiences. In a similar way, Alonso (2011, 29-30) lists a number of what she calls ‘aspects’ of spiritual development: introspection, understanding and acceptance of oneself in terms of thoughts, feelings, emotions, responsibilities and experiences; the exercise of imagination, inspiration, intuition and deep understanding; the experience of awe, wonder and mystery; the tendency to develop conduct motivated by goodness, truth, justice and beauty; reflection on the origin and meaning of life; the search for meaning and purpose; the experience of feelings of transcendence that may give rise to a belief in a divine existence, or the belief that one’s inner thoughts and feelings through art, music, literature, crafts, etc.; respect and admiration for nature; and the ability to build quality relationships with others and develop a sense of community.

Hay and Nye (2006, 65) talk about the categories of ‘Spiritual sensitivity’, which are: awareness-sensing (here-and-now, tuning, flow, focusing), mystery-sensing (wonder and awe, imagination) and value-sensing (delight and despair, ultimate goodness, meaning).

In order to clarify the dimensions of spirituality and to give a picture as accurate as possible of the term, the theoretical models of several scales and questionnaires that measure characteristics related to spiritual dimensions have also been reviewed. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983), contemplates three dimensions: existential, religious and overall; the Spiritual Perspective Scale (Reed, 1987) refers to self-awareness, a sense of connection to a being of a higher nature and the existence of a higher purpose; the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (Gómez and Fisher, 2003) measures personal, transcendental, environmental, communal and global dimensions; the Spirituality Scale (Delaney, 2005) consisting in four domains: higher power or universal intelligence, self-discovery, relationships and eco-awareness ; the Spiritual Intelligence Scale (Grasmane et al., 2022) is based on five components such as creation and awareness of personal meaning, self-understanding, mastery of self-control, awareness of personal authenticity and uniqueness, and social mastery.

After the bibliographic review carried out on this subject we have considered grouping the categories and characteristics of spirituality in the following table, taking into account those that are common to several authors and also our own understanding of this concept (see Table 1).

Table 1: Categories of Human Spirituality

DIMENSION	SUBDIMENSION	CATEGORIES
Human	Intrapersonal	Consciousness

Spirituality		Focusing
	Relational	Need for linkages with others
		Connection with nature
	Transcendental	Sense of mystery, wonder and awe
		Connection with a higher power
		The search for meaning and purpose

Source: Self-made

Almost every definition of spirituality includes the cultivation of inner life (intrapersonal dimension). As the well-known saint in the Russian Orthodox Church, Theophan the Recluse (2016, 198), points out in one of his accurate letters: 'constancy and continuity in the work on oneself is a prerequisite for success in the spiritual life'. In this subdimension of spirituality, there would be two main characteristics: consciousness, as a deep way of connect with oneself and present in most of the conceptualisations listed above in other words (Here and now (Hay and Nye, 2006), understanding and acceptance of oneself (Alonso, 2011) or Self-Esteem (Davies, 1998)) and pointed out directly by Beck (1992); and focusing, as the ability of isolate and focus attention on what it is really important, present in Hay and Nye's (2006) categorisation and as part of the 'Integration' described by Beck (1992).

Spirituality has also a relational dimension, because it makes us build better relationships with others, as indicated by Davies (1998), Alonso (2011), Delaney (2005) or even Beck (1992) with concepts such as 'Love' and 'Gentleness'. Spirituality allows us to connect with others in a much deeper way, nurturing aspects such as compassion, gratitude and forgiveness. It also helps us appreciate and care for the environment, category also included in the conceptualisations of Reed (1987), Gómez and Fisher (2003), Delaney (2005) or Alonso (2011).

Finally, what makes spirituality significantly different from every other dimension is its transcendental nature, present, in some form, in all the classifications reviewed. There is an undeniable tendency on the part of human beings to ask themselves transcendental questions (Davies, 1998), searching for the meaning of life (Davies, 1998; Alonso, 2011; Hay and Nye, 2006; Ellison, 1983; Grasmann et al. 2022), which has derived in multiple occasions in a certain belief or the search for a connection with a divine power (Gómez and Fisher, 2003; Ellison, 1983; Delaney, 2005).

### **A dimension of the human being: a neuroscientific approach of spirituality**

As an inherent part of human being and as a dimension that impacts the individual in different ways, it is understood that spirituality modifies other aspects of the person, such as his or her emotions, behaviour, beliefs, etc. That is why it is considered essential an approach that studies the alterations caused by spiritual experiences in human physiology, even though it is considered spirituality as a complex, abstract and connected with transcendence, which makes it impossible

to measure it as a whole.

If conceptualising spirituality is not an easy task, measuring it would clearly mean a very difficult duty. That is why when trying to measure the impact of spirituality on other dimensions of the human being (corporal, rational, emotional...), specifically on the human brain, we talk about 'spiritual experiences', or practices that are considered 'spiritual'. These experiences, as indicated by Rubia (2016) can be generated by both believers and non-believers, and they can be triggered by beauty, music, falling in love or creativity, among other things. In this sense, what we call spiritual experiences do not necessarily have to be strictly linked to the religious, we can feel them listening to music, contemplating the beauty of a painting, breathing, or walking in the countryside. It should be pointed out, however, that spiritual experiences are not 'spirituality' per se, but are ways or forms that help to cultivate and nurture the spiritual dimension of the individual.

Studies usually measure practices catalogued by 'spiritual' which have a minimal organisational structure such as meditation (Boccia et al., 2015; Lazar et al., 2000), the practice of mindfulness (Barnby et al., 2015; Bockmann and Yu, 2023), contemplative practices (Wilson-Mendenhall et al., 2020), etc.

The pioneers in this field are Newberg and d'Aquili, with several investigations in which they monitored the brain activity of Buddhist monks while meditating (Newberg et al., 2001), nuns in prayer practices (Newberg et al., 2003) or even Muslim believers during prayer times (Newberg et al., 2015).

#### *Changes in the brain through spiritual experiences*

There appears to be a strong correlation between several of the characteristics of spiritual development and the changing function of specific brain structures over time, from infancy to adulthood (Newberg and Newberg, 2006). Spiritual development considers the evolution of spiritual experiences, perspectives and concepts and their parallels with the development of the human brain. The brain changes that are taking place should have a direct impact on human thoughts and behaviours and, therefore, also on religious and spiritual experiences. Moreover, there is evidence in multiple studies of the impact of meditative or prayerful spiritual experiences on areas of the brain such as the parietal lobe (Brefczynski-Lewis et al., 2007; Cahn and Polich, 2006; Herzog et al., 1990; McClintock et al., 2019; Newberg and Iversen, 2003; Newberg et al., 2003; Newberg, et al., 2001; Newberg et al., 2015), an area mainly concerned with the interpretation of sensory information and perception. This part of the brain contains an area which helps create the sense of one-self in connection with the rest of the world, and the spiritual or religious experiences decrease the activity of this lobe, probably because the sense of self is lessened so that it can create a state of 'one-ness' with the universe (Werk et al., 2021). There is also evidence of activation of the prefrontal cortex and the cingulate gyrus while having these experiences (Rubia, 2016). These areas are associated, when activated, with an increase in attention, probably because they are tasks where you have to focus your attention for a long time.

There exist various other brain structures that may hold significance when it comes to spiritual

experiences. It is likely that there could be an increase in activity of two components of the limbic system, such as the amygdala and the hippocampus (Saver and Rabin, 1997). These structures, among other functions, have a close relationship with emotional responses and long-term memory, so it is possible that this type of experiences can be associated with strong feelings and they are usually hardly forgettable.

In addition, it is easy to see that spirituality conditions both cognitive aspects and behaviour. Research in this area highlights the interdependence that exists between brain, cognitive and behavioural processes, which would explain the way in which aspects of spirituality are mobilized and depend on cognitive processes (Jeeves and Brown, 2009). Moreover, there is evidence that contemplative interventions designed to cultivate compassion (linked to aspects of spirituality) can shape prosocial perception and action in everyday life (Wilson-Mendelhall et al., 2022).

### *Spirituality and well-being*

Spiritual experiences are deeply connected to emotions and social connections. There are authors who even define spirituality as a set of emotions: awe, love/attachment, trust/faith, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, joy and hope (Vaillant, 2013). Every facet of an individual is intricately interconnected with one another. For instance, person's convictions are logically intertwined with their attitudes, emotions, values and motivations. Therefore, these experiences may have an effect on the way we feel and think, and, as a result, they would have an impact on several aspects of the human mind and behaviour. The connection between these three main aspects (spiritual, emotional and rational) and the understanding of the different ways they interact, can be critical to deal with difficult situations, as Cegarra Sánchez et al. (2022) noted on their research, on their way to define an interesting concept such as 'practical wisdom'.

There are recent studies indicating that spiritual experiences involve pronounced changes in perception and buffer the effects of stress on mental health (Miller et al., 2019) and there is plenty of evidence supporting the benefits of mindfulness and meditation practices, such as stress reduction and promotion of health (Tang et al., 2015), improving working memory and attentional processes, perceptual abilities and promotes prosocial behaviour and emotional regulation (Boccia et al., 2015) or cultivating self-regulation among the children and promote socially and emotionally positive surroundings that facilitate such growth (Bockmann and Yu, 2023). Moreover, there is a group of researchers that measured the length of the telomeres in a group of individuals which were practicing Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM), a particular kind of practice that focuses on unselfish kindness and warmth towards people, finding out that LKM women practitioners had significantly longer telomeres than those who weren't meditators (Hoge et al., 2013).

Data also suggests links between spiritual experiences and improved mental health and well-being, including increased positive affect (Greenfield et al., 2009; Whitehead and Bergeman, 2011; Van Cappellen et al., 2016), the generation of higher quality relationships (Greenfield et al., 2009; Kalkstein and Tower, 2009), a reduction of the risk of suffering burnout (Holland and Neimeyer, 2005) or even life satisfaction (Barkin et al., 2015).

A global research project conducted by Kimball et al. (2009) studying the levels of spiritual development on youth, observed that those who demonstrated elevated levels of spirituality experienced superior physical and mental well-being, displayed greater civic involvement, achieved higher academic standings, and exhibited an overall greater sense of life satisfaction. Additionally, such individuals showed environmental responsibility, sought peaceful means of conflict resolution, were more inclined towards volunteering, and displayed heightened engagement in their academic pursuits. Furthermore, a research conducted among Latino teenagers living in a low-income, urban locality revealed that significant levels of spirituality provided them with a safeguard against depression and post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from exposure to violence (Jocson et al., 2020).

Therefore, these studies show that the development of the spiritual dimension has positive effects on people's health and well-being, which is also a key aspect for learners to cope with the acquisition of new knowledge.

#### *Implications of spiritual experiences on education*

We understand spirituality as a dimension that has been part of the human being since birth and, as other dimensions, could be more or less developed not just during childhood, but throughout life. However, even though spirituality could be developed in adulthood, it is considered that the period of early childhood is crucial to acquire certain skills of the spiritual dimension. Paul Butler, bishop of Durham, points it out directly on his prologue on Nye's book (2019, 7): 'All human beings are spiritual persons. Children [...] are more open to their own spiritual reality'. Moreover, Miller (2016) indicates that every infant has a natural awareness of suffering and a motivation to alleviate suffering of others, a fact that provides a foundation for spiritual processes. So, even though it is known now that the brain changes continuously throughout life responding to every experience we have and everything we do (Costandi, 2016), it has also been shown that the experiences one has in their early life can have a substantial impact on the formation of their neural pathways, and it seems that these effects can endure over the course of one's lifespan.

This is the main reason why it is crucial to analyse the changes that spirituality and spiritual experiences can produce on children and youth, because, given that there are alterations in certain areas of the brain with these kind of practices or developing spirituality, it may affect critical areas of the learning process located near or even in those parts of the brain. There is emerging evidence, for example, as Nogués (2016) points out, that mindfulness meditation can cause neuroplastic changes in the structure and function of brain regions involved in the regulation of attention, emotion and self-awareness, which are key cognitive processes in the learning process. It has been also studied the impact of these practices on other academic learning abilities such as self-efficacy, organization of and attention to studies, stress control due to time pressure and the environment, involvement with college activity (the study was conducted on higher education levels), emotional satisfaction and class communication, skills that were improved significantly by the meditators group (Lucero Romero and Arias Bolzmann, 2023). Other type of school practices such as exercises of silence, cultivating compassion or even connecting praying with music had also showed great impact on the spiritual development and wellbeing of the

students (Arundell, 2024).

Thus, we understand education should be understood from a spiritual standpoint, where, as D'Souza (2012) indicates, this dimension is what leads the assimilation and internalization of acquired knowledge.

## Conclusions

As discussed in the article, spirituality is a construct that has been defined and categorized in multiple ways. After the review carried out, it is possible to affirm that spirituality is one of the dimensions that make up the human being in an integral way, and that it affects and is affected by the rest of the dimensions of the subject, such as the corporal or physiological, the emotional or the rational. This is how Frankl (1988, 26) puts it, indicating the presence of all these dimensions to compose the human being in a total way:

Only the spiritual person comes to found the unity and totality of the human being. And it finds it as a corporeal-state of mind-spiritual totality. We cannot insist too much on the fact that this triple totality is what constitutes the whole man.

Therefore, we understand spirituality as 'an innate and unique dimension of human beings, involved in intrapersonal, relational and transcendental processes, which can be developed and cultivated to a greater or lesser extent throughout their lives and which has a direct impact on physiological, emotional and cognitive dimensions'.

As a purely human dimension, spirituality needs to be developed and nurtured, and this will lead, not only in an improvement on well-being, but it will have an impact on learning abilities. In this sense, more studies are needed to further investigate the relationship between the development of spiritual characteristics and their impact on brain areas involved in learning.

If we understand that spirituality should be part of the educational curriculum, there is also a need for pedagogical designs that develop the different characteristics of spirituality, not as part of Religious Education, but as a transdisciplinary area that could be cultivated in any subject, as it is something that could be present in any aspect of life.

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## **PERCEPTIONS OF, AND BELIEFS ABOUT SPIRITUALITY IN SPANISH PRIMARY AND EARLY EDUCATION TEACHERS**

### **Abstract**

This study explores the perceptions and beliefs of Spanish early childhood and primary education teachers regarding spirituality, its potential benefits for children's development, and its distinction from religiosity. The research aims to investigate teachers' understanding of spirituality, their attitudes towards promoting it in educational settings, and their views on its cognitive, emotional and relational benefits. A total of 488 teachers from private and state-funded religious schools across Spain participated, providing a diverse sample in terms of age, gender and teaching experience. An ad hoc questionnaire was developed and validated to assess teachers' perceptions and beliefs, including scales for self-perception of spirituality and perceived need for its development in schools. The results show significant gender differences, with female teachers showing higher levels of spirituality and greater support for its educational importance. Primary teachers scored higher than their early years counterparts in recognising the need for spiritual development. Teachers without leadership roles were more supportive of spiritual education. The study also highlights the perceived cognitive, health and relational benefits of spirituality, with most participants distinguishing it from religiosity but acknowledging their interconnectedness. These findings emphasise the need to integrate spirituality into holistic educational frameworks and encourage further research in public school contexts.

**Keywords:** spirituality; education; spiritual education; brain; teacher's spirituality; childhood development

### **Introduction**

In the contemporary educational landscape, spirituality has emerged as a topic of increasing interest and debate. This research focuses on early childhood and primary teachers' perceptions and self-perceptions of the spiritual dimension and their beliefs about the possible benefits of developing it in schools, as well as their conceptualisation of this concept in relation to religiosity. This focus is justified by the importance of understanding how spirituality is addressed within the school environment, particularly at early ages (3 to 12), given the cognitive flexibility and high brain plasticity that characterize children during this pivotal stage of their development (Miller 2016).

The conception of spirituality in the educational context has evolved over the years. While

historically it has been primarily associated with religious matters, it is now understood in a broader sense, encompassing the search for meaning and purpose in life, the connection with oneself, with others and with the environment, as well as reflection on values and principles, and a transcendental dimension (Burgueño-López et al., 2024). Spirituality has become an essential component of holistic education, which seeks the comprehensive development of individuals, including cognitive, emotional, and social skills.

The relevance of exploring teachers' perceptions and beliefs of spirituality lies in the influence they have on the shaping of young, developing minds. The brain plasticity and cognitive flexibility characteristic of children aged 3 to 12 suggest a critical period for introducing and nurturing spiritual dimensions in their education, even though they are not as 'critical' as we thought they were (Costandi 2016). Research in the field of neuroscience has demonstrated that promoting and nurturing spirituality at an early age within educational settings could positively impact memory, attention, cognition, and other cognitive aspects, thereby contributing to comprehensive and balanced development (Heredia, Torrente and Vicens 2020; Shapiro and Carlson 2009).

This research is situated within the context of 21st-century education, which aims not only for the acquisition of academic knowledge but also for the development of socio-emotional skills, the promotion of ethical values, and the encouragement of introspection and empathy. Based on these premises, the hypothesis posed is that education in spiritual aspects during primary and early childhood education can have a positive impact on students' cognitive, emotional and ethical development, preparing them to confront the challenges of an increasingly complex and globalized world.

The present work is structured around the exploration of teacher perceptions and beliefs regarding spirituality, as well as a review of related literature and the interpretation of findings in the context of neuroscience applied to educational contexts. Through this multidisciplinary approach, we seek to shed light on an emerging topic and provide guidance that contributes to a more comprehensive and effective education in the contemporary era. While studies in different countries have explored teachers' perceptions of spirituality, this research makes a unique contribution by providing new and context-specific data from Spain. The cultural and educational framework in Spain, shaped by its historical and societal ties to religion and secularisation, provides a distinctive backdrop for understanding how teachers conceptualise spirituality and its role in the classroom. By addressing this gap in the literature, the study not only enriches the global discourse on spirituality in education, but also serves as a critical reference for policy makers and educators seeking to integrate spiritual development into holistic educational practices.

### *Spirituality and Education*

Despite the fact that this dimension has been recognized as an aspect of the human being, crucial for the personal growth (religious or not) of the child, and being, for some authors such as Nye (2019), at the same level as social or intellectual development, there is an apparent absence of spiritual development in educational curricula (Burgos Gallegos 2020). Why is that? Probably it has to do with the traditional connection with religiosity (at least in the Spanish context), and also

because it is not yet socially understood as a concept that can help the development of individuals and can also lead to the creation of a better society. However, authors such as O'Grady (2022) understand that education of the religious dimension and its inclusion in the curriculum is essential for a society that sees itself as democratic, which is a necessary condition for educating critically thinking and therefore free citizens (Barnes 2020).

Indeed, spiritual growth is widely recognized in the literature as part of personal and social development (Ng 2012; Mata-McMahon 2016; Adams, Bull and Maynes 2016), especially in the early stages of a person's development or, as Zhang and Tang (2010) point out, significantly and especially in adolescence, where aspects such as the sense of self and identity, the relationship with others and with society or the search for meaning and life purpose are essential at this stage of development.

Educational approaches that seek the integral development and global education of students, such as Waldorf pedagogy, have in its conceptualization spiritual aspects as a basis for their whole development, such as meditation, creative and artistic processes or attention focused on nurturing aspects of reverence and religiosity (Goldshmidt 2017). Similarly, Montessori approach nurtures the child's inner spirit, guiding them to develop a sense of inner peace, focus, and a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life. She discovered that when children are safe and in the right environment, they exhibit a love of learning, an ability to self-regulate, and a deep spiritual nature (Berryman 2019).

In Spain, there may be some primary or early childhood teachers that carry out some of the practices that help students develop their spiritual dimension, but they are usually linked to 'Religious Education', as a part of the growth in a particular religious context, and not as nurturing an entire dimension of the individual that should not be reduced to a mere part of religion. In this regard, it is suggested that plans be made for the implementation of various activities and exercises, regardless of the subject. These activities are designed to help students nurture spiritual aspects that could lead to a lasting improvement in key brain regions involved in learning, including memory, attention and cognition.

#### *Why at school?*

As indicated previously, spiritual experiences and the development of this dimension of the person have strong connections with several cognitive aspects involved in the learning process, so it is therefore necessary to deepen these aspects during the school stage. The study driven with adolescents by Riveros and Immordino-Yang (2021) is very enlightened in this regard. They argue that engaging in abstract and systematic thinking connected with higher levels of emotional significance for students, activates a region of the brain referred to as the default mode network or posteromedial cortices, and helps adolescent brain development. This region involves processes such as constructing a sense of self, admiring individuals for their virtuous behaviour or evaluating sacred values, which are characteristics of what the authors defined as 'spiritual thinking'.

But leaving aside the possible effects on cognitive processes, there are other elements supported

by research that makes spirituality an important element to be developed at school. The international study carried out by Pandya (2017) in schools in fifteen countries showed that after a two-year spiritual education program, students achieved higher scores in an altruism scale and prosocial behaviour than those of the comparison group. In this sense, spirituality not only helps the child to acquire intrapersonal skills, typically associated with this term, such as awareness, self-knowledge or transcendence, but it also develops a number of aspects related to social skills improving coexistence and increasing mutual respect. Along the same lines, we find the concept of 'relational spirituality', the impact of which has been measured in schools, reflecting a greater ability to transcend adverse circumstances and being able to build meaningful relationships even with staff (Chapman et al. 2021), pointing out the strong connection between the spiritual education of children and the creation of appropriate human relationships (Fraser-Pearce 2021). There is also a line of research that focuses on whether spiritual development affects academic performance. For example, Pong (2017) analyses the spiritual well-being of 1130 university students and the results suggest a moderate positive relationship with academic performance. Similarly, Napone (2024) reports in his study a positive, although not statistically significant relationship between the level of spirituality of university students and their academic performance.

Educational centres thus become privileged places for developing the characteristics of spirituality, due to the interaction that is generated among peers and the guidance provided by teachers, who must better understand the language of their students and adapt it to the language of spirituality (Adams 2019; Gelell 2018), especially in the early stages of development, as pointed out by the comparative study of kindergartens (Catholic vs. Muslim), in which Stockinger (2019) stresses the need to create spaces for the development of their spirituality. In fact, there is another fundamental aspect to consider that is directly related to how teachers communicate with students and that has also been studied extensively, and that is how the teacher's own beliefs and spirituality in some way affect their way of teaching. Teachers' beliefs influence the strategies they use to manage issues that may arise from diversity (Nelson and Yang 2023), their direct relationship with students (Hartwick 2014; Arthur et al. 2019), or their own professional identity (White 2010).

### *Research questions*

The present study focuses on exploring and analysing the perceptions and beliefs of early childhood and primary teachers about childhood spiritual development. It seeks to understand not only how they understand and value this area of development, but also what they see as its potential benefits for the well-being and holistic growth of children at these formative stages. It also seeks to explore how educators conceptualise the relationship between spirituality and religion, and whether they perceive significant differences between the two concepts in the educational context. Based on these considerations, the following research questions are posed to guide the analysis.

- Are there gender differences in perceptions and self-perceptions of spirituality?
- Are there significant differences in beliefs and perceptions of spirituality between pre-school and primary education teachers?

- Do teachers who consider themselves believers have a sense of the need to develop spirituality in children?
- Does holding or having held a leadership or management position in education have any effect on the spiritual self-perception of teachers?
- Do tutors believe that developing the spiritual dimension can have benefits for different aspects of learning, health or relationships? If so, do they see a need to encourage this development in schools?
- Do teachers believe that the constructs of religiosity and spirituality are distinct, or do they see the two terms as referring to the same phenomenon?

These questions will not only allow us to explore the current perceptions of tutors, but will also open a space for reflection on the integration and value of spiritual development in the educational curriculum.

## Method

### *Participants*

The sample of this study consists of a total of 488 pre-school and primary school teachers in the role of tutors. In Spain, tutors are responsible for the academic, pedagogical and emotional supervision of a group of students, personalizing the educational processes in response to the diversity of the classrooms from both a group and individual perspective (Rodríguez-Fernández and Romero-Lozano 2015). This circumstance makes tutors key figures who have a privileged knowledge of the students' educational processes and their holistic development and it is felt that they can better guide students in their cultivation of the spiritual dimension. This circumstance was a reason for exclusion, since the teachers of these levels who did not have this tutor role were not included in this research. The main purpose of focusing on teachers who also have the role of tutors was that the "relational" dimension is fundamental for the cultivation of spirituality and the development of spirituality in students (Hay and Nye 2006).

The tutors were selected by non-probabilistic convenience sampling from private and state-subsidised religious schools from different regions of Spain (41% of respondents worked in Madrid, and the rest, 59%, worked in other regions of Spain with a high representativeness of the population, with responses from participants from 88% of the Autonomous Communities, and 76% of the provinces), who work with children between zero and twelve years old. Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Characteristics	n	%
Age		
22-32	87	17,83%

	33-46	203	41,60%
	47-60	177	36,27%
	61 and above	21	4,30%
<b>Gender</b>			
	Female	382	78,28%
	Male	106	21,72%
<b>Years of teaching experience</b>			
	1-5	65	13,32%
	6-10	66	13,52%
	11-25	241	49,39%
	26-35	102	20,90%
	36-50	14	2,87%
<b>Educational stage</b>			
	Early Education (0-3)	58	11,88%
	Early Education (3-6)	143	29,30%
	Primary Education (6-12)	287	58,81%
<b>Accredited to teach religion</b>			
	Yes	418	85,66%
	No	70	14,34%
<b>Teach religion</b>			
	Yes	280	57,38%
	No	208	42,62%
<b>Holds or has held a management</b>			

position

Yes	158	32,38%
No	330	67,62%

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Most of the participants were female (78.28%) and middle-aged (77.87% were between 33 and 60 years old). The responses also showed that there is a balance between respondents who teach at the pre-school stage (41.18%) and those who work in primary education (58.81%). It is also interesting to note that although the vast majority of the sample is accredited to teach religion (85.66%), only slightly more than half of them teach it in their classrooms (57.38%). In addition, it is worth pointing out that although more than half of the teachers indicated that they do not and have never held a management position in their profession (67.62%), there is a significant number of them who have held one (32.38%). Finally, they were asked to answer voluntarily whether they identified themselves as believers<sup>1</sup> or not. A total of 92.42% replied that they considered themselves to be believers. This data is related to the fact that, as mentioned above, most of the respondents had the accreditation to teach religion, since in Spain it is necessary to be baptised in order to teach this subject. Although it is true that having been baptised does not mean that the person is a practising believer, it is at least considered that he or she may have a greater openness to transcendence.

#### *Measuring instrument*

In this context, the general objective is to develop a questionnaire to measure the perception and the beliefs of early education and primary teachers about the possibility, necessity and importance of developing spirituality at schools, their understanding of this concept and their opinion about the possible benefits of a greater or lesser development of the spiritual dimension.

For the collection of information, an *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed, entitled "Cuestionario para Tutores de Primaria e Infantil" (Questionnaire for Primary and early childhood Tutors, Appendix I).

The questionnaire is intended for teachers who are practising tutors in primary and early childhood education. The main aim of the questionnaire, similar to that of Mata-McMahon, Haslip and Kruse (2023), is to obtain the tutors' perception of the impact of spiritual development in children aged between 3 and 12. In other words, the aim is to find out whether the tutors at these levels of education take into account the cultivation of what is considered to be the spiritual aspects in the classroom, and whether they believe that nurturing this dimension has implications for learning or for other dimensions of their students' development. To this end, two main scales are considered, as shown in Figure 1: a) tutors' perception and self-perception of this dimension and b) the beliefs about the development of spirituality in schools which, in turn, has two dimensions: b1) the

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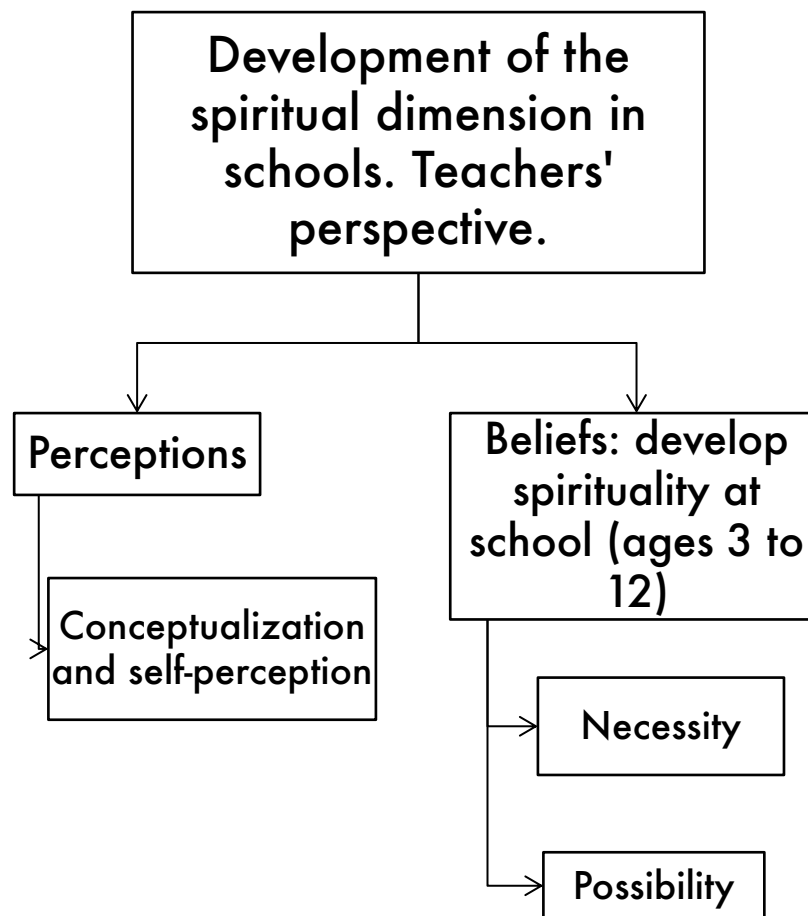
<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that, due to the historical and cultural context of Spain, when we speak of "believers" we are referring to the Catholic religion, despite the existence and growth of other religions in the country.

possibility of nurturing this dimension at schools and b2) the necessity. They were also asked about important concepts such as their perception of the possible benefits of cultivating this dimension for children and whether they consider it to be directly related to religiosity.

With this objective in mind, 20 Likert-type items were designed to measure the scales, another 4 to ask about differentiation with the concept of religiosity, and 14 for possible benefits in different aspects of the child's development, all of them with scores from 1 to 6.

The spiritual dimension referred to throughout the questionnaire is based on the definition given by Burgueño-López et al. (2024, 9): 'an innate and unique dimension of human beings, involved in intrapersonal, relational and transcendental processes, which can be developed and cultivated to a greater or lesser extent throughout their lives and which has a direct impact on physiological, emotional and cognitive dimensions'. In this conceptualization, spirituality is understood as something inherent to the human being, separate from the religious dimension, although present in it, and with three dimensions: the relational, the intrapersonal and the transcendental.

Figure 1. Construct of the questionnaire



The procedure carried out to validate the instrument was the expert judgement technique, which

is the most common way to measure the content validity of a questionnaire, in an accurate, efficient and methodologically rigorous manner (Escobar-Pérez and Cuervo-Martínez 2008; Cardona-Mora et al. 2016).

By means of a purposive sample, a total of 11 teachers, professionals and researchers were selected, who have academic-research links and experience in the area of knowledge of interest in order to guarantee the suitability and contribution to this analysis. The experts, as can be seen in Table 2, have been selected because the spiritual dimension is seen as a purely human domain that has a direct influence on several disciplines.

Identifying the people who will be part of the expert judgement is a critical part of this process. That is why it is considered the suggestions made by Skjong and Wentworth (2000): (a) experience in making judgements and decisions based on evidence or expertise (including degrees, research, publications, position, experience and awards), (b) reputation in the community, (c) availability and motivation to participate, and (d) impartiality and inherent qualities such as self-confidence and adaptability.

In their assessment and contributions, the 11 experts completed a validation guide designed *ad hoc* from a mixed methodological approach and structured in three main sections: a) introduction and instructions, b) assessment of the Likert scale items and c) overall assessment.

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample of experts

Attribute	Details	N
Total subjects		11
Gender	Female	6
	Male	5
Institution	Higher Education	9
	Schools	2
Main Field of Expertise	Education	6
	Theology	4
	Psychology	1

Dunn, Bouffard and Rogers (1999) suggested employing the use of Aiken's V statistic (Aiken

1980; 1985) as it serves a dual purpose: not only does it summarize the range of experts ratings obtained, but it also facilitates the testing of certain hypotheses about the rating values of the population. The quantitative analysis used to obtain this statistic in order to test the Likert scale items was divided into four subscales: clarity, coherence, relevance and sufficiency. Table 3 shows the results of the analysis of the Aiken V for the four proposed subscales and for the entire questionnaire. This statistical analysis was obtained using Microsoft Excel software.

Table 3. Aiken's V statistic

Subscale	Results
Clarity	0.975
Coherence	0.989
Relevance	0.986
Sufficiency	0.975
Total	0.981

The Aiken's V coefficient results for the questionnaire subscales indicate exceptionally high inter-expert agreement, suggesting strong content validity of the instrument. The overall Aiken's V value of 0.981 further reinforces the robustness of the questionnaire in effectively measuring the intended construct.

In the section on open questions, a concept described by the experts was repeated twice: the possibility of including the ethical dimension in the measurement. After careful consideration, it was decided to include an item to address this request.

### *Procedure*

The data collection procedure was developed in a structured way, prioritizing direct contact with potential participants through institutional channels. The majority of participants were invited to participate by e-mail, mainly contacting principals and representatives of educational foundations and religious congregations with a presence in several schools in Spain.

The questionnaire was designed and distributed through the EUSurvey platform, chosen for its solid privacy and data protection policy, which guaranteed the confidentiality and security of participants' responses. The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out exclusively online, facilitating access to the participants and ensuring efficient management of the data collected.

### *Data Analysis*

In order to check the psychometric characteristics of both scales, analyses of their validity and reliability were carried out. In order to check their validity, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out for each scale, the results of which confirmed the structure of the scales as designed in the operationalisation phase when they were created. Data analysis is carried out using the SPSS software (v.29) tool.

The extraction technique used was principal components analysis with varimax rotation to facilitate the interpretation of the factors. The EFA conducted on the first scale revealed the presence of a single factor that explained 58.96% of the total variance. The items clustered in a manner consistent with the underlying theory, with factor loadings greater than 0.40. Indicators of fit supported the analysis: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) goodness-of-fit index was 0.948, indicating a 'good' model fit, and Bartlett's sphericity test was significant ( $\chi^2 = 2933$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. For the second scale, EFA revealed two factors explaining 63.04% of the total variance, with the first factor accounting for 46.36% and the second factor contributing 16.69%. Again, the items were in line with theoretical expectations, with factor loadings above 0.40. Indicators of model fit were strong: the KMO sample fit index was 0.908 and Bartlett's sphericity test was significant ( $\chi^2 = 2418$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis.

Thus, as a result of the factor analyses carried out, two scales were obtained: 1) conceptualisation and self-perception of spirituality (CSPS) and 2) beliefs about the possibility and necessity of developing the spiritual dimension in schools (PNSDS). In this second scale, as noted in the results of the factor analysis, the presence of 2 factors was revealed, namely: a) the possibility of developing spirituality in children in an educational context (F1 Possibility) and b) the need for children to cultivate the spiritual dimension (F2 Necessity).

For the reliability analysis (Table 4), two indicators were used: a) Cronbach's Alpha and b) McDonald's omega, using the Jamovi data analysis tool to obtain the McDonald's omega statistic.

Table 4. Reliability statistics

Scale	Statistic	Value	N items
Concept and self-perception of spirituality (CSPS)	Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.917	10
	McDonald's $\omega$	0.922	10
Possibilities and necessity of spiritual development in schools (PNSDS)	Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.849	10
	McDonald's $\omega$	0.876	10

Therefore, since the results show statistics above 0.70, both categories in both results are considered acceptable.

They were also asked about the teachers' perceptions of the relationship between religion and spirituality, specifically about two issues: 1) whether they considered religion and spirituality to be the same concept, and 2) whether they believed that they are related terms. In addition, they were also asked about possible benefits (cognitive, health and relational) of developing this dimension in children. However, these questions were not categorised as scales.

In order to answer the research questions, we will first consider a frequency data analysis, showing different percentages of responses for each of the blocks analysed. In relation to the

latter questions, for example, 91.99% of the tutors indicated that for them spirituality does not exist only in the realm of religion, and 66.32% that a spiritual person does not have to believe in a superior or divine being. They added that a person who is religious does not necessarily have to be spiritual (67.15%), and yet they think that if a person is religious, these beliefs shape his or her spirituality (84.39%). Regarding the potential benefits of developing this dimension in children, 91.11% of the tutors interviewed consider that there are benefits. Specifically, cognitive benefits (89.31%), such as reasoning, memory, self-awareness or academic performance; health benefits (90.91%), such as emotional well-being, mental or physical health; and benefits in relation to others and the world (94.42%), such as the person's interaction with the world, the ability to transcend oneself or the development of ethics. Finally, in relation to the two scales, Table 5 shows the data of the mean scores and the standard deviation of each scale, with the result obtained from both scales being high and homogeneous.

Table 5. Scale frequency table

Scale	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Range
Concept and self-perception of spirituality (CSPS)	51.15	8.30	[10-60]
Possibilities and necessity of spiritual development in schools (PNSDS)	47.54	8.14	[10-60]

\* The values in brackets in the range are the minimum and maximum scores that can be achieved on each scale.

Independent samples t-tests were used to explore possible differences between male and female in the mean scores across the scales of the questionnaire. In addition, for this analysis, questions about the possible benefits of children's spiritual development were grouped together in order to analyse differences between groups of subjects (Table 6). The results showed statistically significant differences in both scales: the concept and self-perception of spirituality ( $t=3.29$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and the possibility and necessity of developing spirituality in schools ( $t=2.77$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ) with women scoring higher on both, but, as the first factor (F1 Possibility) was highly significant ( $t=3.47$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) there was no significant differences on the second one (F2 Necessity). In addition, women also scored significantly higher on the perception that developing the spiritual dimension in children brings a range of benefits ( $t=1.64$ ;  $p = 0.049$ ), particularly in terms of cognitive ( $t=1.86$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ) and health benefits ( $t=1.95$ ;  $p = 0.03$ ), with no statistically significant differences found for possible relationship benefits. In all cases, the effect values were not excessively high. No statistically significant differences were found in our sample in the similarity of the terms religion and spirituality, and in the relationship between the terms.

Table 6. Gender Differences in Mean Scores Across Questionnaire Scales and Questions

Scale / Question	Gender	N	M	SD	t	P	d
CSPS	Female	382	51.80	7.60	3.29***	<.001	0.36
	Male	106	48.83	10.17			
PNSDS	Female	382	48.08	7.51	2.77**	.003	0.31
	Male	106	45.61	9.90			
F1 Possibility	Female	382	29.34	5.40	3.47***	<.001	0.38
	Male	106	27.13	7.01			
F2 Necessity	Female	382	13.86	2.93	-0.34	.37	-0.037
	Male	106	13.97	3.09			
Benefits	Female	382	69.79	13.74	1.64*	.049	0.18
	Male	106	67.33	13.38			
Cognitive benefits	Female	382	33.86	6.97	1.86*	.03	0.20
	Male	106	32.44	6.86			
Health benefits	Female	382	15.01	3.19	1.95*	.03	0.22
	Male	106	14.31	3.26			
Relational benefits	Female	382	20.92	4.17	0.78	.22	0.83
	Male	106	20.58	3.94			

\*Note: The d values represent effect sizes (Cohen's d).

\*\*Note: With a \* p<.05, with \*\* p<.01 and with \*\*\* p<.001

Additionally, an independent samples t-test analysis was also carried out to analyze possible differences between tutors at the two levels of education: early childhood Education (0-6 years) and primary education (6-12 years). Table 7 shows the results, which show significant differences in both scales: the concept and self-perception of spirituality ( $t=-1.71$ ;  $p = 0.04$ ) and the possibility and need to develop spirituality in schools ( $t=-1.61$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ), with primary teachers scoring higher in both. Furthermore, in this case a statistically significant difference was found in the second factor (F2 necessity) ( $t=-2.24$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ), but not in the first factor (F1 possibility). Finally, regarding the possible benefits, there is only a significant difference in the benefits of the relationship ( $t=-2.05$ ;  $p=0.02$ ), always in favour of the tutors in the primary stage. Again, no

statistically significant differences were found in our sample in the similarity of terms between religion and spirituality.

Table 7. Differences in Mean Scores Across Questionnaire Scales and Questions in Levels of Education

Scale / Question	Stage	N	M	SD	t	p	d
CSPS	Early Childhood	201	50.52	8.06	-1.71*	.04	-0.17
	Primary	287	51.83	7.88			
PNSDS	Early Childhood	201	46.92	7.03	-1.61*	.05	-0.15
	Primary	287	48.14	8.51			
F1 Possibility	Early Childhood	201	28.71	5.39	-0.80	.21	-0.08
	Primary	287	29.14	5.85			
F2 Necessity	Early Childhood	201	13.48	3.01	-2.24*	.01	-0.22
	Primary	287	14.12	2.93			
Benefits	Early Childhood	201	69.97	14.28	-1.34	.09	-0.13
	Primary	287	68.22	12.88			
Cognitive benefits	Early Childhood	201	33.87	7.20	-1.17	.12	-0.11
	Primary	287	33.09	6.60			
Health benefits	Early Childhood	201	14.77	3.26	-0.52	.30	-0.05
	Primary	287	14.93	3.11			
Relational benefits	Early Childhood	201	20.36	4.34	-2.05*	.02	-0.20
	Primary	287	21.18	3.86			

Note: With a \*  $p < .05$ , with \*\*  $p < .01$  and with \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Also, an independent samples t-analysis was then carried out to see the difference between the means of the participating professionals who hold or have held a leadership position, which can be seen in Table 8. Again, we can see that there is a statistically significant difference in the two scales in favour of teachers who have not held a management position: both in the concept and self-perception of spirituality ( $t = -2.09$ ;  $p = 0.019$ ) and in the possibility and need to develop spirituality in schools ( $t = -2.19$ ;  $p = 0.015$ ). There are also significant differences between the first factor F1 (Possibility) ( $t = -1.25$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ), also in favour of those who have not held a management position, and there is no significant difference in the second one F2 (Necessity). No statistically significant differences were found in our sample in the potential benefits of spiritual development or in the similarity of religion and spirituality.

Table 8. Differences in Mean Scores Across Questionnaire Scales and Questions in Holding or having held a management position

Scale / Question	Management Position	N	M	SD	t	p	d
CSPS	No	330	50.62	8.36	-2.09*	.019	-0.20
	Yes	158	52.27	8.09			
PNSDS	No	330	46.98	8.11	-2.19*	.015	-0.21
	Yes	158	48.70	8.10			
F1 Possibility	No	330	28.63	5.90	-1.25	.11	-0.12
	Yes	158	29.33	5.74			
F2 Necessity	No	330	13.59	3.11	-3.20***	<.001	-0.31
	Yes	158	14.50	2.54			
Benefits	No	330	69.02	14.12	-0.58	.28	-0.05
	Yes	158	69.75	14.77			
Cognitive benefits	No	330	33.55	7.20	-0.004	.50	0.00
	Yes	158	33.56	6.46			
Health benefits	No	330	14.75	3.28	-1.02	.16	-0.09
	Yes	158	15.06	3.07			

Scale / Question	Management Position	N	M	SD	t	p	d
Relational benefits	No	330	20.71	4.21	-1.10	.14	-0.10
	Yes	158	21.13	3.92			

Note: With a \*  $p < .05$ , with \*\*  $p < .01$  and with \*\*\*  $p < .001$

To test whether there were significant differences between teachers who were accredited to teach religion and those who were not, an independent samples t-test was carried out, as shown in Table 9. As can be seen, there is a significant difference in the two scales: conceptualisation and self-perception of spirituality ( $t = -2.47$ ;  $p = 0.007$ ) and possibility and need to develop spirituality in schools ( $t = -2.12$ ;  $p = 0.017$ ), and also in the first factor of the second scale (F1) ( $t = -2.91$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), but not in the second factor (F2). In all cases, the difference was in favour of those with accreditation to teach religion in schools. No significant difference was found for the possible benefits for the development of children's spirituality. In this case, statistically significant differences were found in the belief that the terms religion and spirituality are related ( $t = -0.31$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ), with accredited teachers believing that they are related, although no differences were found in the similarity of meaning between these terms.

Table 9. Differences in Mean Scores Across Questionnaire Scales and Questions in tutors accredited to teach religion

Scale / Question	Teach Religion	N	M	SD	t	p	d
CSPS	No	70	48.90	10.54	-2.47**	.007	-0.32
	Yes	418	51.53	7.81			
PNSDS	No	70	45.64	10.08	-2.12*	.017	-0.27
	Yes	418	47.86	7.74			
F1 Possibility	No	70	26.99	7.55	-2.91**	.002	-0.38
	Yes	418	29.17	5.47			
F2 Necessity	No	70	14.06	2.95	0.52	.30	0.07
	Yes	418	13.86	2.97			
Benefits	No	70	68.00	15.56	-0.83	.23	-0.11
	Yes	418	69.46	13.36			

Scale / Question	Teach Religion	N	M	SD	t	p	d
Cognitive benefits	No	70	33.01	8.02	-0.62	.27	-0.09
	Yes	418	33.65	6.78			
Health benefits	No	70	14.63	3.41	-0.61	.26	-0.08
	Yes	418	14.89	3.18			
Relational benefits	No	70	20.36	4.70	-0.96	.17	-0.14
	Yes	418	20.93	4.02			

Note: With a \*  $p < .05$ , with \*\*  $p < .01$  and with \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 10 below shows the bivariate correlations, using the Pearson coefficient, between the questionnaire scales (CSPS and PNSDS) and their beliefs and about the possible benefits of spiritual development in children. Both scales correlated positively with participants who considered themselves believers. These believers correlated positively not only with both scales but also with perceptions of the potential benefits of spiritual development in children. Finally, the perceptions of possible benefits and both scales correlated positively with each other.

Table 10. Pearson correlation coefficients

	Belief	Benefits	CSPS	PNSDS
Belief		0.21**	0.32**	0.32**
Benefits			0.51**	0.48**
CSPS				0.87**
PNSDS				

Note: With a \*  $p < .05$ , with \*\*  $p < .01$

### Discussions and Conclusions

Despite the limitations that can be found in this study, such as the participation only of teachers from Catholic religious schools (due to Spanish context), it is possible to see that the variability of the sample, both geographically and in terms of educational levels, gender and age, makes it possible to extrapolate some interesting conclusions that have served not only to respond to the hypotheses put forward, but also to propose new lines of research and work.

The results showed differences in terms of gender. It is evident that women show higher levels of self-perception of spirituality and also of the need to cultivate the spiritual dimension in children,

as well as of the perception that this work would be of great benefit to students. In this sense, studies have already pointed to higher perceptions of religiosity among women in different contexts, such as in Finland (Kuusisto et al. 2014), in levels of life satisfaction and spiritual health in Hong Kong (Yuen 2015), or in the importance of integrating spirituality into life and civic engagement in a sample from the western USA (Miles and Naumann 2022).

In terms of educational level, the results show that tutors in primary education have a greater desire to develop this dimension in their students than tutors in pre-primary education. Due to the characteristics of the pupils and their capacity to perceive transcendental aspects, the results may reflect a perception on the part of the teachers of a possible influence of the development of this dimension on aspects that can directly influence learning, or on social and emotional dimensions that are very present in the development of the primary stage. However, it is true that the cultivation of this dimension has been much more studied in middle childhood and adolescence (Adams, Bull and Maynes 2015) and there is still a lack of studies that delve deeper into the development of spirituality in the early years of child development.

With regard to tutors who are not or have not been in a leadership position, the results show that they consider the spiritual development of children to be more necessary and more possible, than those who are. This is probably related to the fact that tutors in leadership positions spend less time with their students in the classroom and may be related to the creation of a stronger bond between teacher and student, an aspect for which spirituality is a highly effective factor, according to the qualitative study by Nasrollahi et al. (2020).

The results also showed that teachers who considered themselves to be believers scored higher on the perception that spiritual development in children could have certain benefits, and also correlated positively with both scales, indicating that they considered themselves to be more spiritual people. Furthermore, it is evident that by understanding that spiritual development in childhood is of paramount importance, the pedagogical decisions made in their classrooms (particularly in the subject of religion) are in some way influenced by their beliefs (Nelson and Yang 2022), and there is even research to suggest that this would make them more resilient in their teaching profession (Phillips 2021).

It is also interesting to note the correlation found in the two main scales of the questionnaire: those teachers who have a high perception of their own spiritual dimension also believe that it is possible and necessary to develop this dimension in pupils in schools, because they believe that it provides them with a number of benefits related to the development of the whole person. This supports Ng and Fisher's (2022) study of early childhood teachers in Hong Kong, who concluded that teachers' spiritual well-being was a key factor in their expectations of holistic education for their students. This would imply that, in order to have a greater capacity to develop the spiritual dimension in children, the teacher should cultivate their spirituality in the first place.

In addition, the results revealed significant differences between teachers who were accredited to teach religion and those who were not, particularly in their self-perception of spirituality and their belief in the possibility of developing this dimension in school contexts. This suggests that accredited teachers, who often have a more established connection with transcendent or spiritual

values - even if not necessarily religious in practice - may be a strategic asset in promoting spiritual education within a broader pedagogical framework. Their dual position, as both religiously accredited and actively engaged in non-confessional educational settings, positions them as potentially key agents in bridging the gap between spirituality and secular curricula.

In terms of possible benefits, it is worth noting the high percentage of tutors at early education and primary levels who perceive that the development of the spiritual dimension could have associated benefits for children, both cognitive, health and relational, as has been pointed out in several proposals in schools around the world (Bockmann and Yu 2023; Crooks et al. 2020; Flook et al. 2015; Jackman et al. 2019; Waters et al. 2015).

Regarding the relationship between religion and spirituality, the vast majority of teachers believe that they are not the same and recognise them as separate concepts. However, they also point out that they are related concepts. This also reinforces the concept of spirituality, defined by Burgueño-López et al. (2024) as a dimension of the human being that is innate and present in every person, regardless of their beliefs.

Furthermore, the positive correlation between teachers' self-perception of spirituality and their belief in the necessity and feasibility of children's spiritual development highlights the crucial role of personal awareness in shaping pedagogical attitudes. This finding reinforces the importance of nurturing educators' own spiritual well-being as a fundamental step in promoting holistic education. Finally, the high level of consensus across the sample - regardless of gender, experience or stage of education - about the cognitive, relational and health benefits of spiritual development underlines a shared professional intuition about its educational value. This agreement can serve as a powerful starting point for institutional initiatives aimed at integrating spirituality into child development practices within educational contexts.

All this confirms the need for specific programmes in educational settings to develop the spiritual dimension in children from an early age, with an understanding of spirituality that is clearly distinct from religiosity. Furthermore, although this is a first approximation of the teachers' thinking about spirituality and its development in schools, it opens a dialogue so that further research can be carried out in the future, with the possible participation of teachers in Spanish public schools who are not obliged to teach religion.

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## **PEDAGOGICAL GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EDUCATION: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT**

### **Abstract**

This study explores how the spiritual dimension can be meaningfully integrated into early childhood and primary education in the Spanish context. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data from a questionnaire completed by 488 teachers with qualitative insights from two focus groups with early childhood and primary educators. The findings show that while spiritual practices are present in schools - often through activities such as gratitude, silence, or reflection - they are implemented inconsistently and often depend on individual teacher initiative. Key themes identified through thematic analysis include conceptions of spirituality, practical strategies, necessary teacher training and resources, and institutional challenges. A key finding is that spiritual development must be intentionally embedded in educational structures, supported by clear programs with sequenced objectives, content, and materials. The role of the teacher emerges as central: authenticity, personal preparation, and ongoing mentoring are essential. In addition, the integration of spirituality requires staff-wide sensitivity as well as curricular flexibility to embed this dimension both transversally and in specific educational moments. The study concludes that spirituality is an essential component of holistic education that requires structural support, pedagogical intentionality, and reflective evaluation to be effectively implemented and provides pedagogical guidelines to develop this dimension in children. These findings have implications for teacher education, school policy, and future research on children's spiritual development.

**Keywords:** spiritual development; holistic education; pedagogical guidelines; primary education; early childhood education

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of holistic education (Morse & Allensworth, 2015; Sachdev, 2022), encompassing cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual domains, as a fundamental part of the integral education of students (Mishra & Muddgal, 2022). Although the spiritual dimension has historically been linked to religiosity (specifically in the Catholic religion in the Spanish context), this dimension incorporates facets of the human experience such as the search for meaning and purpose, compassion, conscience, astonishment and wonder. Because of its association with religion, it is still under-represented in mainstream educational discourse (Burgos Gallego, 2020), but research suggests that practices related to this

dimension, based on aspects such as compassion (Kirby, 2017; Carona et al., 2017), meditation (Wisner et al., 2010), mindfulness (Heredia et al., 2024), or contemplative education (Waters et al., 2015; Heredia et al., 2020) have multiple benefits on physical health, mental health, emotional management or even the improvement of cognitive aspects essential to the learning process, such as memory or attention. It also fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, enabling young learners to navigate the complexities of contemporary society.

Despite these benefits, there is a notable gap in terms of research into pedagogical approaches and curricular integration of spirituality in early childhood and primary education. This is particularly important at this stage of development due to the high levels of brain plasticity that characterise childhood (Miller, 2016). Moreover, given that spiritual development has been linked to neural development (Newberg & Newberg, 2008), authors such as Werk, et al. (2021) believe that it is essential to take into account the neurodevelopmental changes that exist at this time in order to nurture and develop spirituality in childhood.

The spiritual dimension is an inherent aspect of human development, associated with meaning making, transcendence and values that guide personal and community life. Indeed, the approach to this dimension developed by Burgueño-López et al. (2024) is founded on the premise of spirituality as a distinctly human aspect. According to these authors, this dimension would consist of three subdimensions: The first category is intrapersonal, affecting aspects related to the self. The second category is relational, referring to relationships generated with others and with the world around us. The third category is transcendental, allowing human beings to go beyond themselves. This view also understands the spiritual dimension as a separate element of a person's religiosity, as most relevant approaches point out (Papaleontiou – Louca, 2023; Rossiter, 2010; Dew et al., 2008). In the context of early childhood and primary education, nurturing the spiritual dimension has profound implications for promoting the holistic growth of young learners.

The mixed methods approach adopted in this study provides a comprehensive perspective on the role of spirituality in early childhood education. Quantitative data derived from a structured survey provide statistical insights into teachers' attitudes, practices and perceived barriers to integrating spirituality into their classrooms. Complementing this, qualitative data from two focus groups reveal the lived experiences, challenges and innovative practices of educators. By triangulating these data sources, the study not only identifies key trends, but also illuminates the contextual nuances that shape the development of spiritual pedagogy in Spanish schools.

### *Spirituality and Education in Spain: Religious Education*

One of the research questions guiding this research is: How do early childhood and primary teachers conceptualise and nurture the spiritual dimension in their pedagogical practices? Answering this question involves unpacking the implicit and explicit ways in which spirituality is manifested in classroom interactions, curricular activities and school culture. For example, activities that encourage self-reflection, foster connections with nature, or promote collaborative problem-solving often serve as conduits for spiritual growth, even if they are not explicitly labelled as such (Alonso Sánchez, 2011; Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2019). In fact, there are practices aimed at spiritual development, such as the one carried out by Arundell (2024), in which music is

used as the main means to cultivate this dimension in religious education classes in a Catholic context; or the experience of Nguyen (2023), in which the idea of developing spiritual intelligence by combining two concepts from the Christian and Buddhist religions in a religious education context is based. Understanding these dynamics is critical to develop pedagogical guidelines that are both practical and contextually relevant.

The Spanish context adds an extra layer of complexity to this discussion. Historically, Spain's education system has been influenced by its Catholic heritage (Pajer, 2019), which continues to shape social attitudes towards spirituality. Despite its status as a secular state, Spain's education system continues to reflect its Catholic heritage, particularly evident in numerous semi-private "concertado" schools. Religion remains an integral component of the curriculum, with families presented with the option of selecting Catholic, other faith-based, or secular instruction. This enduring presence has sparked debate in an increasingly secular society, with some advocating for a pluralistic, religion-free curriculum, while others defend the cultural and ethical value of religious education amid Spain's complex church-state history.

However, this study recognises the importance of balancing respect for individual beliefs with the universal aspects of spirituality that resonate across cultural boundaries. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the wider discourse on how spirituality can be meaningfully integrated into diverse educational contexts. By examining how Spanish teachers conceptualise and implement spirituality in their classrooms, this study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and to offer a roadmap for fostering spiritual growth in young learners.

#### *Existing Educational Programs for Spiritual Development*

In recent years, various educational initiatives around the world have sought to systematize the development of the spiritual dimension in school contexts. These programs are indicative of a growing awareness that spiritual development, while inherently personal, can be intentionally nurtured through structured pedagogical interventions.

An exemplary program is the one implemented at SD Islam Tompokersan in Indonesia, which integrates both structured and unstructured spiritual development activities within the school routine. The structured activities encompass prayer, reflection, Qur'anic recitation, and spiritual mentoring, while the unstructured activities include extracurricular programs designed to cultivate leadership, empathy, and creativity among students (Utami, 2015). In a similar vein, Suryati and Salehudin (2021) explore the design of school counseling programs aimed at fostering emotional and spiritual intelligence. These programs utilize group dynamics and individual mentoring to provide students with support, with the overarching objective being the cultivation of character and self-awareness.

These diverse initiatives underscore the relevance of embedding spirituality within broader educational aims, echoing the notion that moral and existential learning requires intentional space and time in the curriculum. As de Souza (2014) suggests, this is not about proselytizing but about encouraging students to explore meaning, purpose, and connection as part of their overall development.

## Method

The present study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the manner in which spiritual development is addressed within the contexts of early childhood and primary education. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to a broad sample of teachers. To complement and deepen these findings, qualitative data were gathered through two focus groups, one with early childhood educators and another with primary school teachers. This approach allowed for the exploration of perceptions, practices, and contextual factors in greater depth.

### *Measuring instrument*

Two instruments were utilized for the collection of data: first, a semi-structured questionnaire for the collection of quantitative information; second, a script for the development of the focus group sessions and the collection of qualitative data.

An ad hoc questionnaire was design in order to collect information about the spiritual practices the early childhood education and primary teachers carry out on their classes at school. The aim of the questionnaire was to gain broader, measurable insights into the specific activities, contexts and frequency of spiritual practices in educational settings. The questionnaire was designed following established guidelines for survey construction (Dillman, et al., 2014) and informed by the literature on spiritual development in education, using a questionnaire with 6-point Likert scale respond questions for the majority of items. The survey aimed to quantify the nature and prevalence of spiritual practices in schools and to explore the contextual factors that influence these practices, so the range of the items would go from Never, Very seldom/ Less than once a month, Sometimes/Every month, Quite often/Every two weeks, Often/ Every week to Always/Every day. This scale was chosen to avoid a neutral midpoint, encouraging respondents to lean toward agreement or disagreement and providing more nuanced data (Krosnick & Presser, 2010).

To achieve this aim, 19 Likert-type non-cumulative independent items were created asking about the frequency with which teachers engage in activities or dynamics that are considered 'spiritual' by most of the literature consulted, especially in the previous definition of spirituality given by Burgueño-López et al. (2024). The questionnaire also collected information regarding the planning and programming of the various activities intended for spiritual development. In addition, it inquired about the manner in which these activities were executed, whether in collaboration with other educators or as individual pursuits. The questionnaire further solicited information regarding the timing of these activities and whether they were subject to evaluation. Furthermore, sociodemographic information was collected, thereby enabling a comprehensive characterization of the participants.

The widely used method of expert judgement technique was used to validate the questionnaire. A total of 11 teachers, practitioners and researchers were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that participants had academic, research or professional expertise relevant to the field of

study. The aim of this selection was to increase the rigour and relevance of the analysis by including individuals with considerable experience and insight into the subject matter. The selected experts were chosen on the basis of their recognition of the spiritual dimension as an inherently human domain that exerts a significant influence across multiple academic disciplines. The sample of experts was composed of 6 females and 5 males. The participants were affiliated with different educational institutions, with 9 individuals working in higher education and 2 in schools (one of them an expert in early childhood and primary education and the other in secondary education). Regarding their main field of expertise, 6 participants specialized in education, 4 in theology, and 1 in psychology. This variety of backgrounds provides a broad perspective on the study topic and ensures representation from multiple disciplines within the educational and academic sector.

As part of the evaluation and input process, the 11 selected experts used an ad hoc guide to complete the validation. This guide was developed as part of a mixed-methods design aimed at capturing both quantitative and qualitative insights to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the tool. The involvement of experts with different academic and professional backgrounds was instrumental in enhancing the validity and reliability of the data collected and in promoting a multidimensional analysis of the issue.

The validation guide was systematically organised into three main sections to facilitate a structured and thorough evaluation. The first section provided an introduction and detailed instructions to ensure that all experts had a clear understanding of the evaluation process and its objectives. The second section focused on the rating of individual items using a Likert scale, allowing for a standardised assessment of the content, clarity and relevance of the tool. Finally, the third section asked for an overall assessment, encouraging experts to offer broader reflections, suggest improvements and highlight potential gaps. This comprehensive structure was designed to optimise the depth and rigour of expert feedback, ultimately contributing to the refinement and improvement of the research tool.

The Aiken's V statistic (Aiken, 1980; 1985) was used in this study because of its ability to perform a dual function: not only does it synthesise the range of expert ratings, but it also allows for the testing of specific hypotheses about the ratings within the broader population. This approach is widely recognised for its effectiveness in content validation processes (Penfield & Giacobbi, 2004). In order to rigorously evaluate each question of the Likert scale, the quantitative analysis using Aiken's V was structured into four key subscales: clarity, coherence, relevance and sufficiency. This methodological strategy provided a nuanced understanding of the instrument's strengths and areas for improvement. The statistical calculations required for this analysis were carried out using Microsoft Excel, ensuring accuracy in the calculation of Aiken's V coefficients and supporting the reliability of the findings. This application of Aiken's V provided a robust framework for assessing the validity of the instrument in accordance with established psychometric standards.

In this analysis, coherence received the highest validation score (0.989), closely followed by relevance (0.986). Both clarity and sufficiency received a validation score of 0.975. The overall Aiken's V score for the instrument was 0.981, indicating a high level of consensus among

evaluators regarding the validity of the content being assessed. These results suggest that the instrument has strong content validity across all assessed dimensions.

As part of the mixed methodology of the study, it was also conducted through focus groups, which provided a dynamic platform for discussion, reflection and interaction among participants. This method was chosen to encourage dialogue and collective insights, and to promote the emergence of different perspectives. It was also carried out to facilitate the emergence of implementation proposals that had not been previously considered in the questionnaire. The study also sought to promote collective thinking among experts in the field, with the aim of developing applications that could be implemented in schools. This approach was adopted to complement the individual thinking obtained through the questionnaire, rather than relying solely on individual responses. Participants included primary and early years teachers from a range of educational settings, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range of experiences and views in relation to promoting spiritual development in the classroom.

The focus group sessions were carried out using a preliminary script with open-ended questions. This script was designed and validated through the unstructured expert judgment of two specialists in the field (renowned experts in academia with relevant publications in the field of spiritual development in education) to ensure content relevance and clarity. Based on suggestions made by experts, particularly regarding the order of the questions and the structure of the script, it was modified. A question about the place and time for developing spirituality in schools was also added. Topics included practical strategies used in the classroom, perceived challenges, the influence of families and school leadership, and the role of the wider educational community in supporting spiritual growth. Each session was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised to protect participants' identities.

### *Sample*

The sample of this study for quantitative analysis, consists of a total of 488 pre-school and primary school teachers in the role of tutors. The participants in this study were tutors selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling from private and state-subsidised religious schools in different regions of Spain (which does not make a big difference in terms of the type of teaching staff, since all of them are religious schools). Tutoring in Spanish education plays a crucial role in student development and school functioning. Tutors, in this context, are teachers who are specially responsible for the integral development of their students and dedicate significant time to tasks like facilitating transitions between educational levels and supporting students with special needs (González-Benito et al., 2018). Most schools have a specific period of one hour or fifty minutes called "Tutoring," during which a teacher-tutor accompanies students in their holistic development. This figure works on ethical, emotional, and social aspects and carries out individual monitoring of each student.

Of the respondents, 41% worked in Madrid, while the remaining 59% were distributed across other regions, ensuring a high presence of the diversity of the Spanish population. Responses were received from participants in 88% of the Autonomous Communities and 76% of the Provinces . These educators worked with children aged between birth and twelve. Most of the teachers

surveyed, as can be seen in Table 1, were female and middle-aged. There is also a balance between those who teach at the primary level and those who work in early childhood education, and although a large majority were certified to teach religion, slightly more than half teach religion. Approximately one-third of the participants hold or have held a leadership position in their school. Furthermore, a non-compulsory inquiry was made regarding the religious convictions of the subjects, resulting in an overwhelming majority (92.42%) of respondents identifying themselves as religious adherents. It should be noted that in the Spanish context, the vast majority of those who consider themselves believers refer to the Catholic religion.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants (questionnaire).

Characteristics	n	%
<b>Age</b>		
22-32	87	17,83%
33-46	203	41,60%
47-60	177	36,27%
61 and above	21	4,30%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	382	78,28%
Male	106	21,72%
<b>Years of teaching experience</b>		
1-5	65	13,32%
6-10	66	13,52%
11-25	241	49,39%
26-35	102	20,90%
36-50	14	2,87%
<b>Educational stage</b>		
Early Education (0-3)	58	11,88%
Early Education (3-6)	143	29,30%
Primary	287	58,81%

	Education (6-12)		
Accredited to teach religion			
Yes	418	85,66%	
No	70	14,34%	
Teach religion			
Yes	280	57,38%	
No	208	42,62%	
Holds or has held a management position			
Yes	158	32,38%	
No	330	67,62%	

In the sample used for the qualitative analysis, as shown in Table 2, a distinction is made between Focus Group 1 (FG1) participants, who were working professionals in early childhood education (n=5), and Focus Group 2 (FG2) participants, who were working as primary school teachers (n=7).

Table 2. Characteristics of the participants (Focus Groups).

Focus Group	Educational stage	n	Women	Men
FG1	Early Childhood Ed.	5	4	1
FG2	Primary Ed.	7	6	1
Total		12	10	2

As can be seen in Table 2, the majority of participants were women (n=10), a composition that reflects the characteristic feminization of the teaching profession at these educational levels. Notably, the participants represented ten different Catholic religious educational institutions, providing a diverse perspective across different congregational sensitivities within the Catholic tradition. This diversity enhances the qualitative richness of the data and offers a multifaceted view

of professional experiences shaped by different religious education cultures.

### *Procedure*

The data collection process was systematically structured, emphasising direct contact with potential participants through formal institutional channels. Respondents to the questionnaire were recruited primarily via email, targeting school principals and representatives of educational foundations and religious congregations operating in several schools in Spain. The survey instrument was developed and administered using the EUSurvey platform, which was chosen for its robust privacy and data protection policies, ensuring the confidentiality and security of participants' responses. The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out exclusively online, which facilitated the accessibility of the participants and optimised the management and integrity of the data collected. Participation was voluntary and all respondents gave informed consent before completing the survey. Anonymity was guaranteed and data confidentiality was strictly maintained.

The qualitative phase of this mixed-methods study included two focus groups with early childhood and primary school teachers. The focus groups were conducted using the online communication tool Microsoft Teams to facilitate participants' participation. Sessions were recorded for later analysis, and participants were notified in advance to ensure confidentiality of all data.

### *Data Analysis*

The quantitative data analysis conducted was descriptive in nature, focusing on the calculation of absolute frequencies and percentages. For this purpose, the statistical software SPSS (version 29) was used, which allowed a clear organization and presentation of the frequency with which teachers carried out different practices in the classroom. This type of analysis is appropriate because the aim of the study is to identify the regularity with which certain pedagogical actions are carried out, allowing the observation of general trends in the levels of application (daily, weekly, monthly, occasionally or never). The use of frequencies and percentages allows for a straightforward interpretation of the data, which is particularly useful when working with ordinal scales such as the one used in this study.

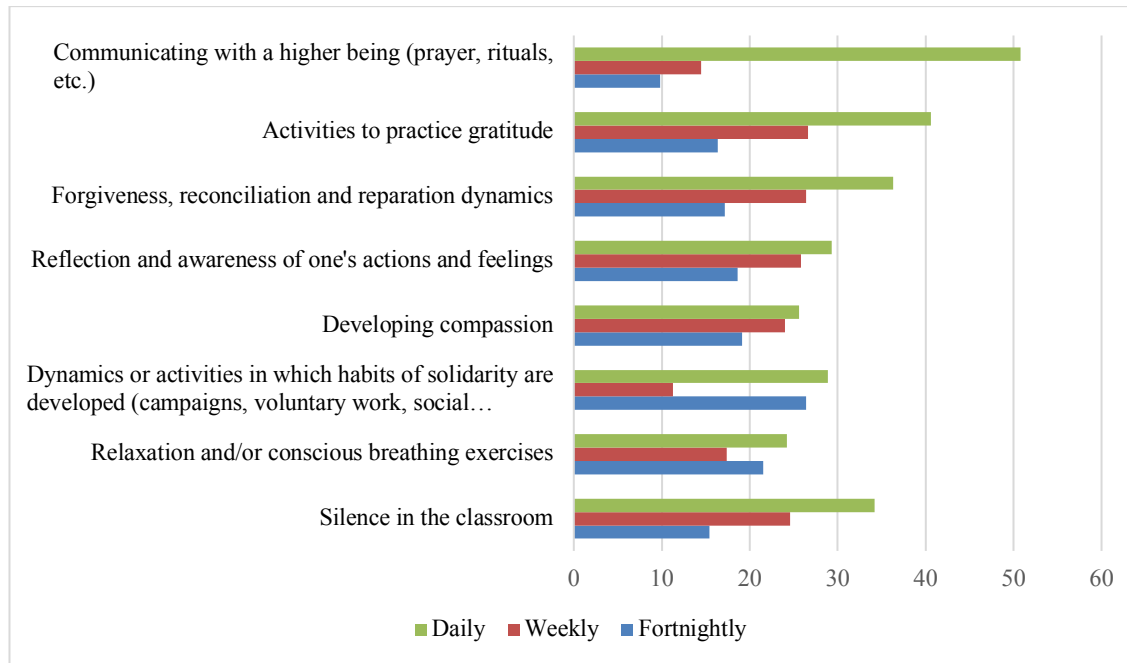
As for the qualitative data, a thematic analysis was conducted following the six-step approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns of meaning related to spiritual development practices in schools. Unlike other qualitative approaches (e.g., phenomenology or grounded theory), thematic analysis was chosen as a flexible, theoretically independent method that is well suited to exploratory aims and compatible with a mixed methods framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method allowed researchers to synthesize key themes from participants' discourse without the constraints of adhering to a particular qualitative tradition. NVivo (version 15) software was used to facilitate the systematic organisation, coding and retrieval of data, and to increase the rigour and transparency of the analysis process.

### *Results*

The main results of the analysis of the participants' answers to the questionnaire are presented

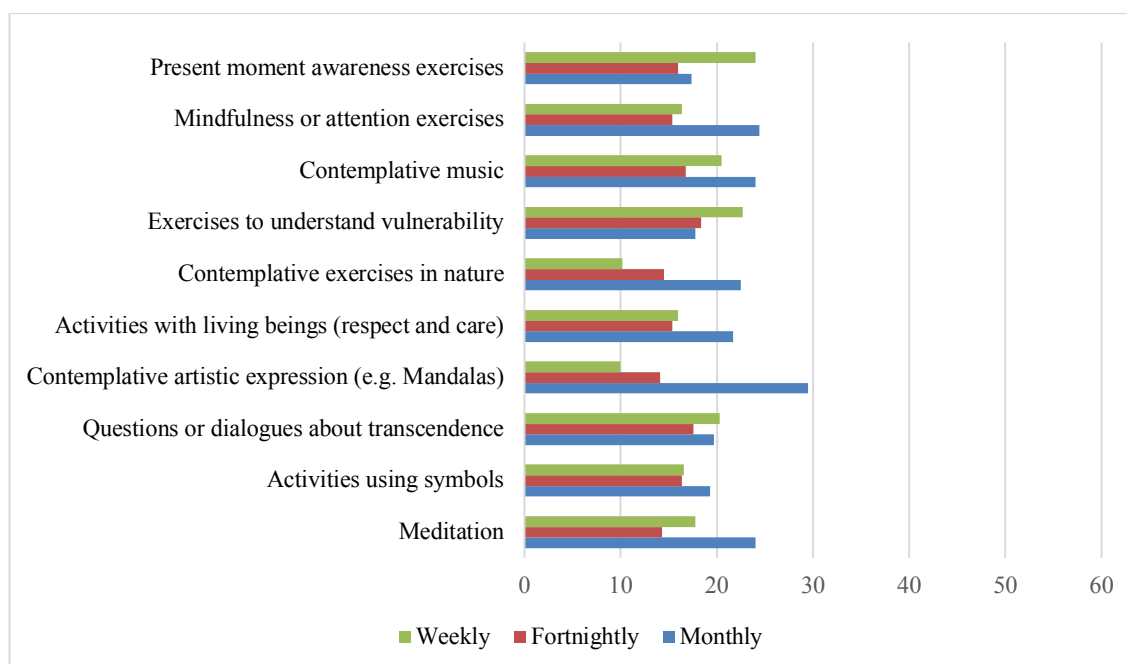
below. They are presented as frequency percentages to allow a better understanding of the different activities proposed and because this is the main objective of this tool. The activities reported as most frequent are classified in Figure 1 into three categories: daily, weekly and fortnightly.

Figure 1: Most frequently activities reported by teachers (in %)



Teachers also identified additional activities aimed at fostering the spiritual dimension, although these activities were not incorporated into the daily curriculum. Rather, they were integrated into the educational planning on a regular basis. These activities are classified in Figure 2 into three categories: weekly, fortnightly and monthly.

Figure 2. Activities not carried out on a daily basis, but with significant presence (in %)



Only one of the activities had a low incidence of implementation in the classroom: Contemplative dance. This practice is the least common, with 58.2% of teachers reporting that they never do it,

and only 1.0% reporting that it is a daily activity.

The teachers were also asked about the way in which the different activities for spiritual development were planned and programmed. While 52.7% of the educators replied that these activities were previously programmed or were part of a specific structured and planned program, 46.5% carried out these activities spontaneously and without any specific structure (the remaining 0.82% did not carry them out). In addition, they responded that these activities were mostly done in collaboration with other teachers (61.3%), although many others also did them on their own (34%).

Another issue raised in the questionnaire was the times when teachers conducted such spiritual development activities. In this case, it was a multiple response question, since they could carry out these activities at different times during the school day. In this regard, it should be noted that in Spain it is common to have an hour or period during the school day dedicated to tutoring, in which the reference teacher of the group works on aspects of the academic, personal and professional orientation of the students, addressing, among other things, issues of coexistence and group dynamics. Therefore, 68.7% of the teachers surveyed carry out these activities in the period set aside for tutoring, while 47% do so through the different subjects of the curriculum (Math, Science, Spanish, etc.). About 30.9% of the teachers said that they do it in both periods. It is also necessary to point out that there are 29.5% of the respondents who answered that they used "other" moments for these spiritual development activities, such as: break, morning prayer, specific interiority sessions, at the beginning of the morning, excursions, complementary activities, etc.

Finally, they were asked if and how they evaluated these activities. 50.8% of the teachers reported evaluating these spiritual development dynamics, while the remaining 49.2% did not evaluate them. Of those who evaluate, 47.8% do so through direct observation, 24.8% use verbal questions, 13.5% use an evaluation rubric, 3.7% use portfolios, and 3.5% use a learning journal. Another 3.5% use "other" evaluation techniques, such as questionnaires, self-evaluations, or an anecdotal notebook. It is noteworthy that, despite the presence of an educational inspection body in Spain, this particular spiritual practice, or even religious education in private or religious schools, remains unregulated by the state.

The subsequent table (Table 3) offers a synoptic overview of the primary aspects associated with the design, implementation, and evaluation of spiritual development activities, as reported by participating teachers in the quantitative phase.

Dimension	Key Insights
Planning Activities	of Spiritual development is approached both through planned programs and spontaneous initiatives, reflecting a combination of structure and teacher intuition.
Collaboration	Many teachers coordinate these practices with colleagues, especially in schools that promote shared

Dimension	Key Insights
	pedagogical projects or interdisciplinary approaches.
Implementation Context	Activities are commonly integrated into the tutorial session, but are also adapted to curricular subjects or embedded in daily routines and special school events.
Types of Activities	Prayer, gratitude exercises, and reflective moments are the most widespread. Other practices include silence, mindfulness, symbolic expression, and storytelling.
Evaluation Methods	Although not universal, evaluation is often based on informal observation and reflective dialogue. Some teachers also use rubrics, portfolios, or journals.

With regard to the thematic analysis of the two focus groups, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step technique, four major themes were identified, noted, and reviewed: 1) approaches to spiritual development, 2) strategies for implementing a spiritual development program, 3) teacher training and resources, and 4) challenges to spiritual development. Each theme is comprised of several sub-themes, which are supported by representative quotes and interpretative insights. The results of the study reflect both converging perspectives and contextual nuances across participants.

The following tables present the main themes and their respective sub-themes. Each sub-theme is accompanied by a description, an illustrative quote, and the potential interpretation that emerges from the quote.

Table 4 presents the thematic framework of Spiritual Development Approaches. This theme explores the conceptual frameworks and underlying assumptions teachers hold about spirituality in education. Participants frequently distinguished spiritual development from religious instruction, emphasizing emotional awareness, values, and interiority as central components. The theme also captures how schools embed spirituality through consistent routines and curricular integration.

Table 4. Approaches to Spiritual Development

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Spirituality vs. Religion	Differentiating between religious instruction and broader spiritual awareness.	"Spirituality is not only the religion class... values and emotional awareness are part of it too."	Teachers often perceive spirituality as broader than religion, aligning it with values and emotions.

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Structure Routine	Integration of spirituality and through school routines like <i>Buenos Días</i> or weekly themes.	"Every Wednesday we have a moment of prayer and a song in the classroom."	Embedding spirituality in consistent rituals provides emotional grounding for children.
Interiority Programs	Projects on interiority go beyond religion and include sensory and emotional awareness.	"The interiority sessions are programmed and through transversal Cross-Curricular and structured throughout the projects across subjects school year."	Spirituality is approached through transversal and activities.

An increasing number of educators are coming to view spiritual development as a holistic, values-based dimension of schooling that extends beyond the scope of religious instruction. This new perspective emphasizes emotional awareness, self-reflection, and ethical growth. This phenomenon is embedded in both daily routines and cross-curricular programs, reflecting a broader educational shift toward inclusive and interior-focused pedagogies.

Strategies for implementing a spiritual development program (Table 5), focuses on the concrete strategies, practices, and tools employed by teachers to cultivate spiritual awareness in the classroom. These include sensory activities, symbolic objects, and creative pedagogical resources. The responses demonstrate how these elements facilitate children's connections with themselves and others in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

Table 5. Strategies for implementing a spiritual development program

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Sensory-based Activities	Activities that foster awareness through the body (e.g., walking barefoot, breathing exercises).	"They take off their shoes and walk slowly to feel the floor... that's also prayer."	Spiritual awareness is often promoted through sensory-motor experiences tied to mindfulness.
Use of Symbols and Materials	Integration of ritual objects or spaces that signal the start of interiority activities.	"They see the suitcase and they already know it's time for the interiority space."	Symbolic consistency helps create emotional readiness for spiritual moments.
Creative and Flexible Pedagogies	Teachers use music, stories, role-playing, and post-its to invite reflection in a child-centered way.	"We show a Pixar short, and write a word that came to mind, and then we reflect and sing together."	Aesthetic and playful formats support spiritual expression in children.

Educators adopt an embodied, child-centered approach to spiritual development by using sensory practices, symbolic cues, and creative pedagogies that foster presence, reflection, and emotional engagement. Rather than relying on abstract instruction, spirituality is nurtured through meaningful, developmentally appropriate experiences that honor children's inner lives and sense-making capacities.

The third theme, as illustrated in Table 6, pertains to the subject of teacher training and the utilization of educational resources. This theme explores the professional preparation and ongoing support necessary for educators to effectively nurture spiritual development. The participants placed significant emphasis on the value of lived experiences, collective reflection, and collaborative resource-sharing. Many respondents articulated a need for ongoing mentoring and practical guidance, beyond the scope of isolated training sessions.

Table 6. Teacher training and resources

Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Experiential Training	The importance of <i>living</i> spirituality before transmitting it.	"Before the project begins, Teachers emphasize the staff have a moment of need to embody what interiority to experience it they intend to pass on to themselves."	students.
Need for Ongoing Support	Teachers ask for more than one-off workshops: mentoring and collaborative reflection.	"Not a 3-hour course, but someone who can accompany you and help improve the sessions in practice."	Practical, contextualized guidance is more effective than abstract training.
Materials and Collaboration	Sharing resources, building toolkits collaboratively.	"We keep an Excel where we each add ideas or to developing activities... we build our sustainable spiritual own dossier over time."	Peer collaboration is key programming.

As demonstrated in Table 6, educators advocate for a profoundly experiential and collaborative approach to professional development in spiritual education. Rather than depending on workshops that are not interconnected, they emphasize the significance of embodied experience, ongoing mentoring, and peer-generated resources as fundamental supports for meaningful and sustainable practice.

The final theme identified pertains to the primary challenges in the spiritual development of children in schools (see Table 7), which addresses the key challenges and barriers that teachers encounter when implementing spiritual development in schools. These include structural issues such

as time constraints, variations in staff engagement, and misunderstandings from families. The findings suggest that successful integration depends on institutional support, team alignment, and effective communication.

Table 7. Challenges to spiritual development

Subtheme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Interpretation
Time Constraints	Difficulty fitting spiritual activities into the school timetable.	"Sometimes you skip it, and do it when you feel the children need calm... we have the freedom to move it."	The rigid school schedule limits implementation unless teachers can adapt flexibly.
Staff Motivation and Belief	Teachers' engagement varies according to their personal connection with spirituality.	"Some just do it to tick the box... but others really transmit it because they believe in what they're saying."	Authenticity is crucial for meaningful spiritual development.
Misconceptions from Families	Concerns about families interpreting spirituality as religious indoctrination.	"Some parents confuse it with religion, so we try to explain it's more about values and self-awareness."	Effective communication with families is needed to clarify the educational intent.
Curricular Integration and Institutional Fit	Uncertainty or inconsistency about where and how to place spiritual development in the curriculum.	"We decided to include it within the tutorial plan... it was the only way to fit it into the schedule."	The lack of formal curricular space for spirituality makes it dependent on internal coordination and creativity.

Teachers face several structural and cultural barriers when implementing spiritual development, including limited curricular space, varied staff engagement, and parental misconceptions. These findings underscore the need for flexible scheduling, institutional coherence, and clear communication strategies to ensure that spirituality is embraced as an educational rather than religious objective

## Discussions

This section of the study discusses the key findings in the context of the research questions and existing literature, identifying implications for practice, teacher training, and educational policy.

Quantitative data showed that a significant proportion of teachers engage in spiritually oriented practices, particularly those linked to reflection, silence, emotions and values-based education, which, as Meehan (2002) points out, can be manifestations of the spiritual dimension. These findings were enriched by qualitative insights from the focus groups, which provided a deeper understanding of how such practices are interpreted, embedded, and sometimes contested within the school context.

As education is defined as the process of facilitating spaces where personal and social development can occur, it follows that spiritual development must be incorporated within this pedagogical mission. The consensus among educators is that spirituality cannot flourish in isolation; it necessitates the presence of structural conditions and a coherent educational design that not only legitimizes its presence but also facilitates its integration into academic institutions. The absence of institutional space, whether curricular or extracurricular, hinders the integration of spirituality into broader activities.

A salient finding underscores the pivotal role of the teacher's disposition, presence, and personal preparation. As several participants noted, authenticity and coherence between what the teacher embodies and what is conveyed to students are fundamental. As Morales-Vallejo (1995) asserts, "the messenger is the message", emphasizing that spiritual development practices are not merely transmitted but mediated through the educator's own lived experience and disposition. Consequently, specialized training is imperative, encompassing both theoretical and experiential components, with a focus on self-awareness and introspection.

Moreover, beyond the initial training, some participants underscored the necessity for continuous support and professional guidance. This accompaniment has been delineated as a strategy for reflective improvement, enabling educators to re-examine, refine, and enhance their practices in a sustained and dialogical manner. As one teacher articulated during the focus group, "We require more than a single workshop; we need a collaborator to accompany us on our journey and facilitate our growth." This perspective is consistent with the broader calls for mentoring and collaborative learning spaces (Yu et al., 2020), particularly in the context of a domain as sensitive and personal as spirituality.

Additionally, the collective attitude of the teaching staff was identified as a predominant factor. Despite the acknowledged heterogeneity in educator commitment, participants underscored the imperative for a climate of respect and receptivity, where spiritual education is not undermined by passive resistance or indifference. In this regard, a "prepared and receptive staff", as Inlay (2016) shows, is a necessary condition for consistent and meaningful implementation. Such a staff would be capable of engaging or, at the very least, not obstructing the process.

The flexibility and richness of the spiritual dimension were also highlighted. Participants highlighted that opportunities for spiritual development can arise in various settings and moments, including specific lessons, morning meetings, periods of calm following recess, and activities that integrate multiple disciplines or occur outside of regular class time. This perspective lends support to a conception of spirituality as being both transversal and contextually adaptable. Spirituality, by its very nature, is an abstract concept that requires concrete realization within both the cultural

context and the individual psyche. As Stuart Mill (2023) insightfully notes, "Different people also require different conditions for their spiritual development [...] just as the whole variety of plants cannot live in the same physical conditions, in the same atmosphere or in the same climate" (pp. 167-168).

However, the analysis also made clear that spirituality cannot rely solely on individual improvisation. While acknowledging the value of teacher initiative, there is a shared concern about the necessity of a structured program, including objectives that are sequenced, content that is developmentally appropriate, suggested practices, and concrete materials. The implementation of such a program would contribute to the mitigation of fragmentation and the promotion of an understanding of spiritual growth as a gradual, layered process, rather than a singular experience. This process could encompass a range of activities, from basic mindfulness practices to more profound experiences of transcendence and inner connection.

If spiritual development is to be regarded as a valid educational goal, its effects must be observable and evaluable. This does not imply reducing it to measurable performance; rather, it involves designing tools to assess, qualitatively and formatively, how students evolve in self-awareness, relational depth, and openness to meaning after engaging with these practices. As the field matures, it is imperative to integrate pedagogical innovation with rigorous evaluation to ensure its legitimacy and effectiveness. These reflections establish the foundation for the subsequent conclusions and practical guidelines that are presented in the following section.

## Conclusions

This study has underscored the relevance and complexity of integrating spiritual development into early childhood and primary education. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research has elucidated a range of pedagogical, institutional, and attitudinal factors that condition how spirituality is conceptualized and enacted in educational institutions.

While teacher initiative plays a significant role, the findings indicate that systemic support, structured programs, and shared understanding across the educational community are essential. The findings of this study indicate that a teacher's authentic disposition, ongoing mentoring, and the ability to create emotionally safe and symbolically meaningful spaces are key drivers of successful implementation. Furthermore, the transversal and adaptable nature of spirituality suggests that any space and moment—whether curricular or extracurricular—has the potential to serve as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

The results of the study indicate that spiritual development, when regarded as an authentic educational objective, necessitates the incorporation of reflective evaluation processes and institutional commitment.

### *Pedagogical Guidelines of Spiritual Development in the Classroom*

The study's findings support the formulation of a coherent set of pedagogical guidelines that promote the sustainable integration of spiritual development within early childhood and primary education. The aforementioned vision is contingent upon the necessity for institutional commitment,

which is defined as a shared and explicit purpose among school leadership, teaching staff, and the wider educational community. Such a commitment ensures that the integration of spiritual development is not a peripheral initiative, but rather one that is embedded in the school's ethos and long-term strategy.

The efficacy of implementation is contingent upon the establishment of clear and transparent communication with families. It is imperative to apprise parents of the objectives and scope of the spiritual development program, with particular emphasis on differentiating it from religious instruction. This is essential for fostering trust and promoting active engagement. This dialogic approach fosters the development of a school culture characterized by the engagement and informed participation of families, and where spiritual development is conceptualized as a collective, inclusive endeavor.

The program's design must strike a balance between structure and flexibility. While the curriculum should include goals that are meticulously organized in a sequential manner, content that is appropriate for the age of the students, recommended practices, and materials that have been meticulously curated, it should also allow for spontaneous and meaningful encounters. This flexibility enables teachers to respond authentically to children's needs and developmental rhythms, enhancing the experiential nature of spiritual engagement.

It is imperative to acknowledge the significance of integrating spiritual development into the curricular and extracurricular dimensions of school life. Spirituality, by its very nature, ought not to be confined to isolated sessions; rather, it should permeate various disciplines—such as literature, science, and art—as well as informal settings, including tutorial periods and daily routines. The strategic allocation of dedicated time within the academic schedule is a crucial step in emphasizing its significance and mitigating the risk of its marginalization.

Collaboration among teachers is another critical dimension. The collaborative design and implementation of the program fosters reflective practice, innovation, and mutual support. The ideal scenario entails the extension of this collaborative ethos beyond the teaching team, encompassing families and community partners. This collaborative effort serves to reinforce a shared responsibility for children's holistic development.

Pedagogically, the program should be grounded in active and creative methodologies that promote expression and engagement. Examples of formats that resonate with children's imaginations and foster deeper interior awareness include storytelling, symbolic play, cooperative dynamics, artistic exploration, and encounters with nature. Activities should be meticulously designed to address three interrelated dimensions of spirituality: intrapersonal (through practices like silence and reflection), relational (through cooperation, forgiveness, and gratitude), and transcendental (by cultivating awe, ethical inquiry, and connection with the natural world).

The incorporation of aesthetic and symbolic elements serves to further enhance the program's overall richness. Sensory elements, including music, specific locations, and visual symbols, collectively foster environments that evoke profound emotional responses, thereby facilitating introspection and spiritual receptivity. These meticulously curated materials function as anchors,

facilitating children's entry into reflective states of being.

The successful implementation of such a program is contingent upon the formation and disposition of educators themselves. It is imperative that educators are not only equipped with specialized training in spiritual pedagogies but also afforded opportunities for personal engagement with the practices they facilitate. It is imperative to acknowledge the significance of ongoing professional development, mentorship, and collaborative learning environments in maintaining motivation and competence in this domain.

It is imperative that the evaluation of spiritual development be approached with a reflective and formative stance. Conventional metrics should be eschewed in favor of qualitative tools such as observation, reflective dialogue, portfolios, and student journals. These qualitative tools are essential for recognizing the subjective, evolving, and deeply personal nature of spiritual growth. In summary, these guidelines underscore the need for a comprehensive and thoughtful framework that affirms spirituality as an essential dimension of holistic education in contemporary schooling.

These findings offer a timely and constructive response to current debates in Spain and beyond regarding the place of spirituality in secular educational contexts. In a nation where the historical entanglement of religion and education continues to spark tension, especially in state-funded schools, this study's emphasis on a non-confessional, holistic approach to spiritual development is particularly salient. The proposed pedagogical guidelines, by framing spirituality as a multifaceted dimension comprising intrapersonal, relational, and transcendental aspects, shift the discourse away from institutional religion toward a broader humanistic perspective rooted in emotional literacy, ethical awareness, and existential inquiry. This position is consistent with mounting international calls to acknowledge the significance of children's internal lives in their comprehensive development. Such advocacy is evident in the frameworks established by UNESCO and the OECD, which promote social-emotional learning and well-being in educational settings. The necessity of institutional commitment, transparent communication with families, and teacher training is furthermore emphasized to navigate public concerns around indoctrination or ideological bias. The aforementioned guidelines thus constitute a pragmatic model for integrating spiritual development into education systems. Such systems are becoming increasingly pluralistic and secular; nevertheless, they must still respond to children's needs for meaning, connection, and inner growth.

It must be acknowledged that this study is not without its limitations. The sample, while rich in insights, was limited to a specific cultural and educational context—namely, Spanish early childhood and primary education—which may influence the generalizability of the results to other regions. Furthermore, the participants' familiarity with the subject matter (a Catholic vision) may have resulted in an underrepresentation of more critical or resistant voices within the profession. Future research should include a more diverse sample, including families, school administrators, and pupils, to triangulate perspectives on the spiritual dimension. The implementation of longitudinal studies following the integration of structured spiritual programs could also elucidate long-term effects and optimal practices. Furthermore, the design and validation of evaluation tools for spiritual development in children represents a promising and necessary line of inquiry.

The present study contributes to the growing recognition of spirituality as a valid and necessary dimension of holistic education. This approach necessitates meticulous planning, collective responsibility, and a redefined vision of education that encompasses not only knowledge and skills but also meaning, connection, and transcendence.

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## CONCLUSIONS

The present doctoral thesis is predicated on the conviction that the spiritual dimension constitutes an essential and unavoidable aspect of integral human development (Sepúlveda del Río, 2024). This assertion is substantiated not solely by theoretical contemplation but also by the empirical evidence amassed through the three studies conducted. In particular, the spiritual dimension (often confused or equated with religious education in the Spanish educational context) emerges from the data as a broader, inclusive construct that merits independent pedagogical attention. In an era marked by mounting complexity, characterized by the proliferation of interconnections, the presence of cultural diversity, and the socioemotional challenges that are characteristic of the developmental stage of childhood, there is an increasing need to cultivate individuals who possess the capacity for introspection, the ability to nurture an inner sense of self, and the capacity to engage with others and with the natural environment in a manner that is ethical and compassionate (Powell & McGuigan, 2024). This necessity was clearly reiterated in the responses of teachers participating in the second and third studies, who consistently acknowledged these capacities as central to student development, despite often lacking clear strategies for how to foster them in the classroom.

Spirituality is conceptualized as an essential component of the integral development of the individual (Dávila Narváez, 2023). The overarching objective of this research endeavor has been to make progress towards this integration through the implementation of a methodological approach in three complementary phases. The initial study, employing a thorough literature review, disclosed a fractured and frequently denominational approach to spirituality in academic discourse. From this, an inclusive and operational definition was formulated (which was the reference point for the subsequent empirical phases). Spirituality is conceptualized as a human dimension that transcends the purely religious and comprises intrapersonal (consciousness and focusing), relational (need for linkages with others and connection with the environment), and transcendental (search for meaning and wonder and connection with a higher power) components. In the second study, teachers' perceptions were analyzed through quantitative instruments administered to a large sample. The data indicated, as pointed out in the literature (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2007; Giglio, 2024) a pervasive recognition of spirituality's educational value, while concurrently unveiling impediments such as conceptual confusion, institutional barriers, and inadequate training. These obstacles were not merely theoretical assumptions but were quantitatively documented by the high percentage of respondents expressing difficulty in implementing this dimension, despite perceiving it as important (Vokey, 2000; Flanagan et al., 2012). The third phase of the study addressed this need by incorporating teachers' voices through focus groups and offering concrete pedagogical guidelines based on real experiences. Consequently, the conclusions of this thesis are not merely speculative in nature; they are derived from the empirical evidence collected in the course of three studies.

The primary findings and contributions of this compendium of articles are, first and foremost, the establishment of a clear and robust conceptual framework on the concept of spirituality. While spirituality has been defined and operationalized in a myriad of ways across disciplines—including health care, psychology, theology, and education—it remains a complex and often contested

concept. Existing definitions are often heavily influenced by the contexts in which they emerge. Some definitions are deeply rooted in religious traditions (Fowler & Dell, 2005; Damiano et al., 2019), while others are grounded in psychological constructs such as well-being or resilience (Howard et al., 2023; Devender Sharma et al., 2024). Still others, such as Drive (2007) or Tangen and Felton (2018) are framed in terms of personal meaning-making or existential exploration. This conceptual multiplicity, while abundant, poses a challenge for educational integration due to the potential for ambiguity, resistance, or misinterpretation among educators and institutions. Acknowledging the intricacies involved, the present research endeavored to provide a contribution that is specifically tailored to the educational field. The objective was to construct a conceptual space that is pedagogically coherent, inclusive, and respectful of diversity. In order to support this claim, the thesis has drawn upon a wide array of academic definitions and empirical studies, synthesizing their most relevant aspects to create an integrative framework that supports the development of spirituality as a human dimension—distinct from doctrinal or ideological positions, yet capable of accommodating diverse cultural and personal beliefs. This initiative not only addresses the interdisciplinary gaps in the field but also ensures the practical applicability of the concept in early childhood and primary education, where clarity and inclusivity are paramount.

The findings of this thesis highlight the importance of incorporating the spiritual dimension in the initial compulsory educational stages, taking advantage of, as Johnston (2004) states, the high capacity for brain plasticity and the emotional and cognitive openness characteristic of childhood. The integration of spirituality in the initial phases of human development has been demonstrated to facilitate the comprehensive development of students, in addition to fortifying indispensable competencies for harmonious coexistence within heterogeneous and intricate societies (Surr, 2019). These competencies encompass emotional self-regulation, empathy, ethical reflection, and the capacity to discern meaning and purpose.

In order to achieve this objective, it is proposed that an inclusive and non-denominational spirituality be adopted. This spirituality is intended to transcend institutionalized religious frameworks and to be understood as a human dimension accessible to all children, regardless of their beliefs, worldviews, or cultural backgrounds. As delineated by Bellous (2019), this educational understanding of spirituality is distinguished by its respect for diversity and its deliberate avoidance of indoctrination. Instead, it promotes pedagogical experiences that cultivate introspection, relational depth, and a sense of wonder through open and reflective practices.

Adopting this perspective has important implications for educational practice. It facilitates the integration of spirituality into the quotidian classroom environment through universally accessible experiences, such as silence, storytelling, dialogue, engagement with nature, or reflective questioning, as opposed to the conventional approach of doctrinal instruction. In this sense, spirituality becomes a transversal dimension that complements cognitive, emotional, and social learning, contributing to the holistic development of the child. Hyde (2008b) underscores that the spiritual development of children is frequently manifested through relational awareness, imagination, and a capacity for discerning meaning that emerges organically in environments

conducive to growth. Educators who recognize these expressions are able to nurture spiritual development without requiring adherence to specific belief systems.

Furthermore, the adoption of an inclusive framing of spirituality can serve to legitimize its presence within plural and secular educational contexts, thereby mitigating resistance among educators and institutions that may harbor concerns regarding neutrality or ideological boundaries. By grounding spiritual development in shared human experiences and educational values, schools can create spaces where all students feel recognized and respected.

However, the effective implementation of this educational dimension requires explicit institutional support (Viennet & Pont, 2017). It is imperative that educational administrations recognize its importance, offer specific training to teachers, and promote its inclusion in center educational projects and in the curriculum in a transversal and planned manner. In the domain of education, the assurance of spiritual education demands a collective and enduring vision of integral education. In this regard, it is essential that spiritual formation does not rely exclusively on the goodwill or individual initiative of select educators, but rather be integrated into a more comprehensive and structured approach involving the entirety of the educational community.

Such integration necessitates policy coherence across multiple levels of the education system, as well as a shared commitment among policymakers, administrators, and educators to embed the spiritual dimension within the wider goals of holistic human development. As Fullan (2007) has emphasized, the attainment of sustainable educational change is contingent upon the cultivation of a culture of professional collaboration, systemic alignment, and continuous capacity-building. In this regard, educators should not only be equipped with theoretical frameworks and practical tools, but also supported by institutional environments that legitimize and encourage the implementation of these approaches. In the absence of such structural support, even the most well-intentioned initiatives risk remaining isolated, inconsistent, or unsustainable.

Moreover, the incorporation of the spiritual dimension must be articulated within broader educational objectives that prioritize ethical reflection, emotional literacy, and meaning-making as essential components of a 21st-century education (Harste, 2014). It is imperative for educational institutions to possess a collectively held institutional vision, one that acknowledges spiritual growth as a pivotal component of the learner's development. This transformation necessitates an investment in pedagogical innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the creation of inclusive frameworks that allow spirituality to be approached from multiple cultural and philosophical perspectives (Fernandes-Osterhold, 2021). Embedding spirituality in education should not be considered an episodic or individual undertaking; rather, it should be regarded as a deliberate, coordinated, and ethically grounded strategy for fostering integral human development.

The results of this thesis engage constructively with a wide range of international literature on childhood spirituality, while also opening up new lines of reflection and providing clarity in areas where conceptual ambiguity prevailed. The operational definition of spirituality proposed in the first article aligns with the experiential, relational, and open-to-mystery nature of spirituality as described by Hyde (2008a) and Eade (2009). However, the article goes beyond these previous

definitions by providing a comprehensive and didactically useful integration of the main components of spirituality. The empirical data obtained in the second study corroborate the earlier observations of Moran (2003) regarding the conflation of spirituality and religiosity among teachers. However, the present study adds to the existing body of knowledge by exploring this phenomenon within the specific context of the Spanish education system, a topic that has been underrepresented in international literature. Conversely, the pedagogical guidelines established in the third study furnish pragmatic responses to the demands previously identified by authors such as de Souza and Hay, yet not methodologically developed. However, several unresolved issues persist. The question that arises is how to reliably measure the impact of spiritual work on the development of minors. What institutional resistance exists in public education systems? Which initial training would be most appropriate for teachers?

It is imperative to acknowledge that the implementation of the pedagogical proposals developed in this thesis may encounter substantial practical challenges. First, while the model of spirituality proposed here has been carefully defined as inclusive and non-doctrinal, it is important to acknowledge that not all educators may subscribe to this perspective. Some may continue to perceive spirituality as an exclusively religious construct, which could lead to resistance or misunderstanding when attempting to integrate it into educational practice. It is possible that some individuals may not perceive it as a significant component of student development. This may be due to a lack of training, personal beliefs, or institutional pressures that prioritize more easily assessed competencies (Cebrián & Junyent, 2015).

Additionally, the extant academic literature has underscored the potential for spirituality to encompass a "dark" dimension. De Souza (2012), for instance, cautions that spiritual exploration does not invariably result in a state of inner peace. Instead, it has the potential to unveil latent internal conflicts, existential anxiety, or unresolved personal challenges. This suggests that educators must be prepared to support students through complex and sensitive processes, which may entail reflections on topics such as death, injustice, or suffering. In the absence of adequate training, this responsibility can be overwhelming or even counterproductive.

Furthermore, while this thesis underscores the importance of teamwork, shared reflection, and institutional coherence, real-world school contexts often lack consensus among teachers about the role of spirituality in education (Watson, 2000; Kung, 2007; Jacobs, 2012) and in policy makers (Erricker, 1998). These disagreements may stem from a variety of personal trajectories, religious backgrounds, pedagogical beliefs, or the demands of standardization and assessment frameworks. Absent deliberate spaces for dialogue, the proposed guidelines risk remaining limited to isolated initiatives led by individual teachers, without broader institutional support.

Consequently, while this thesis provides a comprehensive educational model, it also underscores the necessity for clearly defined institutional strategies, comprehensive teacher preparation, and an educational environment that fosters ethical and existential reflection. The effective integration of spirituality in education must be regarded not as a solitary effort but as a collective, progressive, and profoundly human undertaking. When conceptualized from a holistic and inclusive standpoint, spiritual education cannot depend exclusively on the personal vocation or initiative of

isolated educators. Instead, it necessitates, as shared by Shanklin et al. (2003): systemic commitment, shared pedagogical responsibility, and a common framework that ensures coherence, continuity, and legitimacy across educational contexts.

In order to cultivate this environment, however, teacher training programs must go beyond conventional content delivery and encompass reflective practices, emotional awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and a profound understanding of the human condition. It is only through this comprehensive formation that educators can be adequately prepared to support students in their pursuit of meaning, identity, and belonging—particularly in today's pluralistic and fragmented societies. As de Souza (2016) asserts, the spiritual dimension, when appropriately nurtured, fosters well-being, relational depth, and moral agency—key elements for living ethically and meaningfully in community. This vision necessitates that educational institutions evolve into transformative spaces, where students are not only expected to acquire knowledge, but also to cultivate the intrinsic qualities that are essential for becoming responsible and compassionate human beings.

#### *Limitations and prospective*

The primary limitation of this study is the composition of the sample, which is predominantly constituted by teachers in Catholic schools in Spain. Despite its pervasive presence in the Spanish educational system and its capacity to foster a conducive environment for contemplating the integration of spirituality, it is important to acknowledge the potential divergence in perspectives among its constituents, particularly in comparison to those employed by public school teachers. This is due to the fact that, in the latter context, the diversity of convictions and institutional secularism pose dissimilar challenges and opportunities. In this sense, the research has focused on teachers' perceptions and proposals, without considering the voice of other educational actors, such as the student body.

In this regard, it is imperative to expand the scope of the study to encompass the public school environment. This expansion aims to explore the manner in which the spiritual dimension is conceptualized and applied in increasingly secular and diverse contexts. Similarly, the incorporation of additional educational actors, such as management teams, guidance counselors, families, and notably, students, is regarded as essential for enhancing the diagnostic process and pedagogical proposals (Reyes-Parra et al., 2020). To that end, the implementation of longitudinal studies is recommended to evaluate the impact of spiritual development programs on learning, emotional regulation, coexistence, and student wellbeing. This will allow for the consolidation of the legitimacy and effectiveness of their integration into compulsory education.

A further constraint of this research pertains to its geographical scope. While spirituality has been defined in this thesis as innate and as a universal aspect of human beings, it is imperative to acknowledge that its expression, experience, and practice vary significantly across different cultural and geographical contexts. Consequently, it can be posited that the findings of this study are contingent upon a particular cultural and historical context, as well as within the framework of a pedagogical understanding of spiritual development in Spain.

In terms of future directions, this thesis seeks to contribute to an emerging field of inquiry by exploring research opportunities that may facilitate a more profound understanding and support for the integration of spiritual development within formal educational settings. A clear priority is to extend the study to non-denominational contexts, especially in public schools, where addressing spirituality may encounter particular resistance and specific challenges. Furthermore, it is imperative to utilize a more diverse sample population in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the school environment. This diverse sample population should include, but is not limited to, teachers, students, families, management teams, and other educational agents. Consequently, there is an imperative to design and validate specific assessment instruments, both qualitative and quantitative, to measure the impact of pedagogical practices aimed at spiritual development. A pertinent research trajectory entails the execution of longitudinal studies that investigate the impact of these practices on the well-being, coexistence, and ethical development of students in both the immediate and long-term context. A comprehensive exploration of the initial and ongoing training of teachers is imperative. This exploration should involve the identification of training models that prepare teachers to integrate the spiritual dimension from an inclusive, cross-cutting approach that respects cultural and religious diversity. These prospective pathways are poised to fortify an emerging domain of academic inquiry, one that, while in its nascent stages, harbors immense educational and societal promise.

The spiritual dimension must be recognized as an essential part of the integral development of the person, as posited in Cicero's work, *Orator*: "In all great arts, as in trees, we like the height, but not so much the roots and the trunk; but there can be no height without roots and trunks" (p. 94). As posited by the author, this phenomenon is exemplified by the aesthetic value of trees, where the height is regarded as aesthetically pleasing, yet the roots and trunk are often overlooked. This perspective underscores the notion that the height of an artistic creation is contingent upon its foundation, which is akin to the interdependence of the various components of a tree. In the context of education, cultivating these competencies demands a holistic approach that encompasses not only the technical dimension, but also the spiritual and ethical foundations that underpin personal development and facilitate the deployment of other competencies.

The integration of spirituality into the educational sphere does not entail the imposition of any particular belief system; rather, it involves the creation of an environment that fosters introspection, empathy, and the search for meaning, while ensuring respect for the diversity of worldviews and convictions present in any classroom (Ai, 2002). Such an approach is not only consistent with democratic values, but also fosters the development of students as holistic individuals, capable of engaging with themselves, others, and the world in a reflective and compassionate manner. In this context, spirituality is understood not as dogma, but as an open and inclusive dimension of human experience that nurtures inner awareness and ethical sensibility.

This thesis thus becomes a call to reflect on the limitations of the current educational paradigm and advocate for models that place the human being—rather than mere academic outcomes—at the center of educational efforts. A truly transformative education must nourish both intellect and spirit, shaping not only competent students but also wise, morally grounded, and emotionally attuned individuals. As Palmer (1998) asserts, "the quality of teaching cannot be reduced to a

mere set of techniques; it derives from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). This perspective underscores the necessity to reconnect educational practice with its profound existential and ethical dimensions. In cultivating the spiritual aspect of students, educators are also called to engage with their own inner lives and moral commitments. Consequently, the incorporation of spirituality in education does not manifest as an ancillary element, but rather as a fundamental component of an educational framework that aspires to humanize, transform, and cultivate meaning in a progressively intricate and pluralistic global context.

This thesis represents the conclusion of a research endeavor that brings together systematic analysis and the development of a set of proposals, which aim to contribute to ongoing discussions on the integration of the spiritual dimension in the foundational stages of education. Throughout this process, the objectives set have been achieved. First, a term that is as profound as it is often misunderstood was conceptually clarified. Second, empirical knowledge was gained of how teachers perceive and experience it. Third, real, viable, and diversity-friendly pedagogical guidelines for its development in the classroom were offered. This work has combined academic rigor and educational sensitivity, with the aim of recovering an essential dimension of the human being that has been absent—or misunderstood—in schools for too long.

Beyond the results obtained, the objective of this research is to contribute on teaching practice and student training. When executed effectively, spirituality has the potential to facilitate the development of a more profound self-awareness in children, a more empathetic relationship with others, and a more receptive attitude toward life. The cultivation of wonder, silence, interiority, and meaning are not merely supplementary components, but rather the foundational elements upon which the development of comprehensive learning can be built. This thesis is, therefore, an invitation to educate not only for knowledge, but also for being.

This pedagogical approach entails a vision that extends beyond the mere preparation of students for academic success or the demands of the labor market. Engaging with education as a profoundly human endeavor is imperative, as it responds to the fundamental human need for purpose, connection, and transcendence. As John Dewey (1916) proposed, education should not be regarded as preparation for life; rather, it is life itself. It must be firmly embedded in the lived experience of learners and oriented towards the development of their full potential as human beings. Educating for being signifies nurturing the inner world of the student, thereby fostering them to evolve into reflective, caring, and ethically engaged individuals.

To educate not only for knowledge, but above all for being: this is the enduring aspiration that must guide any project committed to the integral development of the person and to the construction of a more humane and just society.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire

# Cuestionario para tutores de Primaria e Infantil

Los campos marcados con \* son obligatorios.

## Cuestionario para tutores

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El siguiente cuestionario forma parte de una investigación llevada a cabo por un equipo de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas.

Agradecemos sinceramente tu disposición a participar en esta investigación. Antes de comenzar, queremos asegurarte que tus respuestas serán tratadas de manera completamente anónima y confidencial, cumpliendo con la normativa europea de protección de datos vigente. Tu participación es fundamental para obtener información valiosa, y tu privacidad es nuestra máxima prioridad. Te invitamos a responder con sinceridad, sabiendo que tu aporte contribuirá significativamente a nuestros objetivos de investigación.

¡Gracias por formar parte de este estudio!

Confirmando que acepto los términos

## Datos generales

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\* Sexo

Mujer

Hombre

Otro

\* Edad

\* Ciudad en la que trabajas

\* Años trabajados como maestro/a

Años trabajados en tu centro actual

\* Tipo de centro en el que trabajas

- Público
- Concertado religioso
- Privado
- Concertado no religioso

En caso de haber trabajado previamente en otro centro, señala el tipo de centro:

- Público
- Concertado religioso
- Concertado no religioso
- Privado

\* Ámbito del centro educativo

- Consideramos ámbito rural menor o igual a 2.000 habitantes
- Urbano
- Rural

\* Curso en el que eres tutor/a

Puedes marcar más de una opción si es necesario

Primer ciclo infantil (0-3)

1º Ed. Infantil (3 años)

2º Ed. Infantil (4 años)  3º

Ed. Infantil (5 años)  1º Ed.

Primaria

2º Ed. Primaria

3º Ed. Primaria  4º

Ed. Primaria  5º

Ed. Primaria  6º

Ed. Primaria  1º

ESO

2º ESO

3º ESO

4º ESO

1º Bachillerato

2º Bachillerato

Formación Profesional

\* ¿Ocupas o has ocupado algún cargo de gestión o dirección?

Sí

No

\* ¿Tienes la DECA?

Sí

No

\* ¿Impartes alguna de estas asignaturas este curso?

- Religión  
 Valores sociales y cívicos  
 Otra asignatura de corte similar que sea alternativa   
 Ninguna de las anteriores

En caso de haber seleccionado 'Otra asignatura', por favor, especifica cuál:

¿Cómo te declaras?

- Ateo  
 Agnóstico  
 Creyente no practicante   
 Creyente practicante

## Prácticas educativas

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En este apartado debes responder acerca de la frecuencia con la que llevas a cabo cada tipo de actividad con los alumnos de tu tutoría.

Los ejercicios deben ser **actividades específicas** para desarrollar este tipo de ámbitos.

Frecuencia con la que llevas a cabo actividades para desarrollar estos aspectos con tu tutoría

	Nunca	Muy pocas veces / Menos de una vez al mes	Alguna vez / Cada mes	Bastantes veces / Cada quincena	Muchas veces / Cada Semana	Siempre / Cada día
* Silencio	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Meditación	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* <i>Mindfulness</i> o ejercicios de focalización de la atención	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Música contemplativa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Elaboración de mandalas u otro tipo de expresión artística contemplativa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Preguntas o diálogos sobre la trascendencia	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Ejercicios contemplativos en la naturaleza (silencio, conversaciones, lectura contemplativa, meditación, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Reflexión y toma de conciencia de lo que se hace y siente	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Desarrollo de la compasión	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Ejercicios para comprender la vulnerabilidad y entenderse vulnerable	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Dinámicas o actividades en las que se desarrollen hábitos solidarios (campañas, voluntariados, acción social, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Dinámicas para ejercitar el perdón, la reconciliación y la reparación	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Comunicación con un ente superior (p.ej. oración, ritos, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Actividades en las que se usen símbolos para expresar una verdad universal más profunda	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Actividades o dinámicas para ejercitar el agradecimiento (dar gracias por lo que somos y tenemos, agradecer a compañeros o adultos por cosas que hacen, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Danza contemplativa	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Actividades con seres vivos (respeto y cuidado de animales, plantas, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Prácticas de relajación y/o respiración consciente	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Ejercicios de toma de conciencia del momento presente						
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\* ¿En qué momentos las llevas a cabo?

Máximo 3 selección/selecciones

- Tutoría
- En Asignaturas (Matemáticas, Ciencias Sociales, etc.)
- Otros

En el caso que hayas seleccionado 'Otros', por favor, indica en qué espacios (recreos, extracurriculares, etc.):

\* Y estas dinámicas o actividades que llevas a cabo:

- Están planificadas previamente (has pensado cuándo y cómo hacerlas antes de llevarlas a cabo)  Forman parte de un programa específico estructurado
- Las haces de forma aleatoria o sin una estructura concreta  No las llevo a cabo

En caso de haber seleccionado la primera opción, por favor, señala brevemente cómo se planifican:

¿Y las llevas a cabo en colaboración con otros docentes?

- Sí
- No

\* ¿Evalúas estas actividades?

- Sí
- No

En caso afirmativo, señala por favor qué instrumentos utilizas para evaluar este tipo de actividades:

- Observación directa
- Rúbrica
- One minute paper o reflexión breve por escrito
- Preguntas orales
- Diario
- Portafolio
- Otra

En el caso de haber seleccionado 'Otras', por favor, especifica cuál:

Escribe algún ejemplo de actividad, momento o experiencia en la que hayas desarrollado alguno de los aspectos anteriores

## Dimensión Espiritual

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\* Define, brevemente y con tus palabras, lo que entiendes por **Dimensión Espiritual Infantil**







Si tienes algún otro comentario en relación a la temática del cuestionario, puedes hacerlo aquí:

## Contact

[Contact Form](#)