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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

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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.

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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 (Carona et al., 2017; Kirby, 2017), meditation (Wisner et al., 2010), mindfulness (Heredia et al., 2024), or contemplative education (Heredia et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2015) 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 (Dew et al., 2008; Papaleontiou - Louca et al., 2023; Rossiter, 2010). 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.¹ These educators worked with children aged between birth and 12. 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

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants (questionnaire).

| Characteristics | n | % |
|---|-----|--------|
| Age | | |
| 22–32 | 87 | 17,83% |
| 33–46 | 203 | 41,60% |
| 47–60 | 177 | 36,27% |
| 61 and above | 21 | 4,30% |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 382 | 78,28% |
| Male | 106 | 21,72% |
| Years of teaching experience | | |
| 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% |
| Educational stage | | |
| Early Education (0–3) | 58 | 11,88% |
| Early Education (3–6) | 143 | 29,30% |
| Primary Education (6–12) | 287 | 58,81% |
| 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% |

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.

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 ($n = 7$).

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 10 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.

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 |

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.

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.

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'

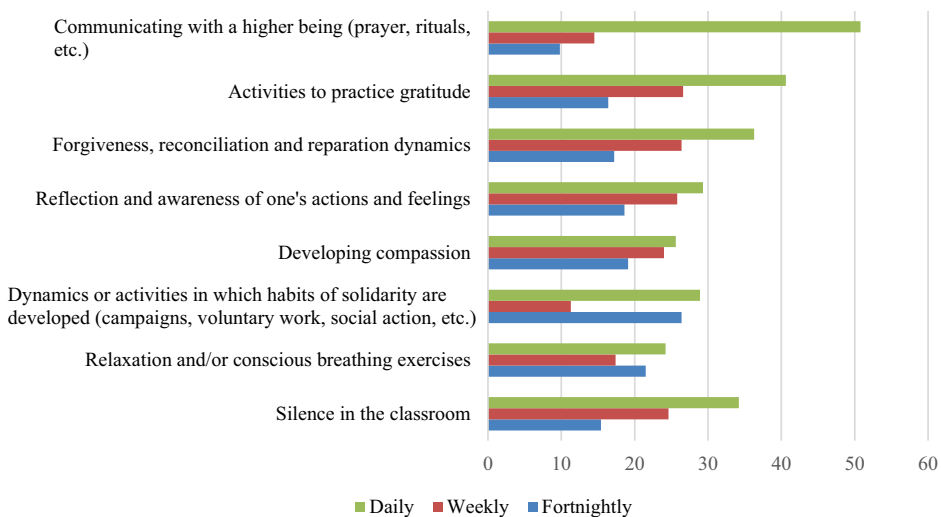


Figure 1. Most frequently activities reported by teachers (in %).

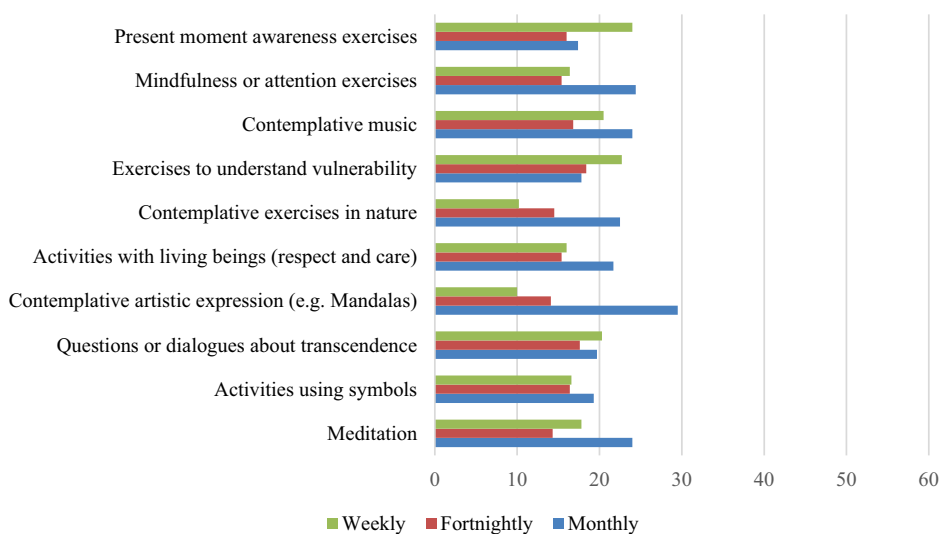


Figure 2. Activities not carried out on a daily basis, but with significant presence (in %).

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.

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

Table 3. Key dimensions of spiritual development activities in school practice.

| Dimension | Key Insights |
|------------------------|--|
| Planning of Activities | 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 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. |

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.

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.

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

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. |
| Structure and Routine | Integration of spirituality 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 rhythm and emotional grounding for children. |
| Interiority programs as a Cross-Curricular Project | Projects on interiority go beyond religion classes and include sensory and emotional awareness. | "The interiority sessions are programmed and structured throughout the school year." | Spirituality is approached through transversal projects across subjects and activities. |

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, write a word that came to mind, and then we reflect and sing together." | Aesthetic and playful formats support spiritual expression in children. |

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.

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.

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

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, the staff have a moment of interiority to experience it themselves." | Teachers emphasize the need to embody what they intend to pass on to 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 activities . . . we build our own dossier over time." | Peer collaboration is key to developing sustainable spiritual programming. |

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. |

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.

Note

1. The term 'Autonomous Community' is the official name for the 17 regions that make up the Spanish political landscape (plus the two autonomous cities). Within each Autonomous Community there are smaller regions officially known as 'Provinces'.

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