

SPIRITUAL LIFESTYLE IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Introduction: In the Colombian educational context, education is understood as a necessary pedagogical action for human lifelong learning from biopsychosocial areas and centered on comprehensive development. Thus, social and cultural educational contexts present particularities, habits and behaviors that lead to the configuration of specific lifestyles for children and adolescents. The objective of the study is to analyze the spiritual lifestyle of students belonging to the Association of Jesuit Schools of Colombia (ACODESI).

Theoretical Framework: Spiritual practices encompass feelings, experiences, dreams, and frustrations, in turn, are related to a spiritual lifestyle, which can be linked to school contexts. In this sense, the literature highlights four categories of spiritual lifestyle in the educational context: a) Interiority «being aware of one's inner reality - feelings, impulses and emotions»; b) Community «self-awareness that allows seeking autonomy with possibilities to think and reflect»; c) Service «transcends personal interests to empathize with others from a love that manifests as dignity and justice»; and d) Celebration «giving meaning to beliefs and acting upon them through the expression of signs and symbols that commemorate interiority, community, and service». In children and adolescents, these categories manifest within their daily school activities, integral to their formative context.

Methodology: A mixed descriptive cross-sectional study was applied to a population of students (N=839) aged 14.5 ± 2.5 years, enrolled in three schools belonging to ACODESI during the first semester of 2024; 55.1% (n=462) were female and 44.9% (n=377) were male. A self-administered questionnaire was designed with 16 Likert Scale items, with a Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.85 (α), and two open-ended questions, which inquired about spiritual lifestyle variables such as: Interiority (IT), Community (CM), Service (SV) and Celebration (CB).

Results: From a quantitative perspective, a negative index is evident for IT, where 50.8% (n=426) do not engage in any activities to become aware of internal life-affecting factors. Similarly, for SV, 50.4% (n=423) do not participate in collaborative spaces to assist those in need. Likewise, in CB, 71.9% (n=603) do not utilize signs and symbols to express internal life, and 69.8% (n=586) do not identify with signs and symbols that express a spiritual experience as a life existence. Conversely, CM shows a positive index where 73.1% (n=613) consider peers and friends to be a support network during tough times, and 75.9% (n=637) cite the family network as the main support during adversity. Qualitatively, students recognize that achieving a spiritual lifestyle entails praying, meditating, attending mass and church, having faith, and approaching God. They emphasize the importance of self-awareness, reflecting on one's actions, and strengthening support networks with family and friends. Moreover, students note the need for schools to offer more classes and guidance on the topic and to reinforce pastoral care as a strategy for fostering this lifestyle.

Conclusions: There is a necessity to strengthen student support strategies through the development of pedagogical approaches that address educational contexts, focusing on student attention, prevention, and self-reflection toward enhancing school well-being and promoting spiritual lifestyles that contribute to quality of life and healthy living habits.

Keywords: Spirituality, Lifestyle, Educational Context.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Colombian educational context, education is understood as a necessary pedagogical action for human lifelong learning from biopsychosocial areas and centered on comprehensive development.

Thus, social and cultural educational contexts present particularities, habits and behaviors that lead to the configuration of specific lifestyles for children and adolescents [1].

Furthermore, from the perspective of integral formation based on the dimensions of the human being, it can be affirmed that the experiences derived from the educational context present characteristics and values that reflect lifestyles [2]. These lifestyles can undergo variations according to the social and cultural context, as well as the social relations and living conditions of people. Nevertheless, the encouragement of experiences within the educational context that facilitate the development of an integral lifestyle is, to some extent, associated with the spiritual dimension, whereby spirituality is acknowledged as an inherent aspect of human existence [3].

In this context, spiritual lifestyles are connected to social and cultural practices. Consequently, the Political Constitution of Colombia guarantees the freedom of individuals to embrace and respect spiritual and religious practices. Similarly, the educational context must provide comprehensive formation in a manner that safeguards religious freedom within the school and fosters the growth of human spirituality [4].

Accordingly, an integrative education is regarded as the optimal advancement of the complete human being, encompassing all dimensions: physical, intellectual, social, moral, and spiritual [5]. In this sense, the spiritual lifestyle contributes to human development in an integral way, as spirituality represents a path for human formation. It focuses on cultivating a deeper connection with oneself, with others, and with the universe, which contributes to the construction of a culture (moral and ethical) for life [6].

In this means, spirituality and the connections that are forged through experiences and interactions within the educational context present internal and external relationships of the human being, thereby enabling the significance of acting from daily life with oneself and with others, allowing for actions the individual's actions contribute to personal growth and collective advancement, which can be evidenced by various symbols and indicators in daily life [7]. These interactions with the natural, social, and cultural environments are crucial elements in shaping lifestyles [8].

It is therefore imperative that all those responsible for the care and upbringing of children give due consideration to the spiritual development of the child from the earliest stages of life [9]. Consequently, within the educational setting, it is imperative to implement pedagogical initiatives that facilitate the acquisition of spiritual competencies. Thus, childhood and adolescence (ages 7 to 17) represent a pivotal period in an individual's life, during which habits and lifestyles that will shape their future health are first established [1]. This is a crucial stage of school life, during which individuals begin to develop their own unique lifestyle, which is closely linked to their overall health and well-being [10].

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Spiritual practices encompass feelings, experiences, dreams, and frustrations, in turn, are related to a spiritual lifestyle, which can be linked to school contexts [3]. It is evident from an examination of the literature that spirituality is fundamental for self-knowledge. This is because the recognition of oneself and one's behavior allows for the development of essential values such as respect, love, harmony, and humility. Furthermore, spirituality should be considered a social characteristic, with the promotion of spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding being a key objective [11].

Conversely, in the context of contemporary globalization, spirituality provides an opportunity to embrace an era in which the human experience is characterized by a profound longing for a life of fulfillment and authenticity [12]. In this way, spirituality in the educational context can facilitate the student's existential realization that they have been created for a purpose, which enables them to discern the optimal way to live and to actualize themselves. This process allows them to perform to the best of their human capabilities [12].

In this sense, Christian spirituality has historically been closely associated with specific lifestyles. The very notion of being human, as espoused by this tradition, entails the incarnation of the divine experience within the world of life. These developments permit the supposition that any experience of this spirituality is, in turn, an experience of care for the human being in all its dimensions [3]. Likewise, spirituality is strongly associated with the adoption of healthy lifestyles among those who practice it. This indicates that spirituality is closely associated with lifestyles that provide a comprehensive and fulfilling quality of life. Consequently, the authors recommend further investigation into the implications of spirituality and healthcare in students [3].

Similarly, the literature indicates the necessity of promoting the development of spiritual intelligence in educational settings to foster a healthy inner equilibrium in students, enabling them to perceive realities and act in a fair, peaceful, and appropriate manner [13]. This concept considers the human being in his totality, encompassing his multifaceted nature and interactions with society and nature. In the educational context, the significance of nurturing this intelligence through the active involvement of teachers and parents is underscored, with the aim of fostering self-awareness and social cohesion.

In the same way, spirituality can be defined as a dimension that encompasses inquiries into the significance, purpose, and meaning of life, as well as the concept of interconnectedness with others, nature, and the divine. It also involves a search for the transcendent and the development of values, such as justice. However, the presence of religious beliefs is not a prerequisite for the existence of spirituality. This indicates that spirituality is not solely defined by religious aspects; it is also intertwined with the individual quest for the meaning and value of human existence. Consequently, the concept of spirituality can be perceived as more existential than religious in nature [14].

In this sense, the literature highlights four categories of spiritual lifestyle in the educational context: a) Interiority; b) Community; c) Service; and d) Celebration. In children and adolescents, these categories manifest within their daily school activities, integral to their formative context (Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptual and theoretical categories of spiritual lifestyle.

Categories	Definition
Interiority	The capacity of the human being to engage in introspection, or the act of reflecting on one's own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In other words, it entails observing one's own inner reality, which encompasses feelings, bodily sensations, and emotions. In this sense, it is the daily cultivation of healthy thought patterns with deep consideration of emotions [15].
Community	The capacity of the human being to achieve self-awareness enables the formation of support systems from diverse sources and contexts, facilitating autonomy and the capacity for critical thinking and reflection. In this sense, the construction of a community structure that strengthens the fraternal encounter, the vocation, and the attitude of acceptance based on the community bond is cultivated through the will [12], [16].
Service	The capacity of human beings to transcend personal interests and adopt the perspective of others through the virtue of love, which is manifested in the form of dignity and justice. In this sense, it is a sentiment of affection or proximity to other human beings, as well as love, which must be demonstrated in action rather than merely verbalized [17].
Celebration	The capacity of human beings to imbue their beliefs with meaning and act in accordance with them through the expression of signs and symbols that commemorate interiority, community, and service. In this sense, it is a relationship of interdependence between parties, which consists in the recognition of the rights and claims of others [18].

3 METHODOLOGY

This research employed a descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods approach, drawing from a population of students (N=839) aged 14.5 ± 2.5 years, enrolled in three schools affiliated with the Association of Jesuit Schools of Colombia during the first semester of 2024. The sample was selected with a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95% ($p < 0.05$). The sample was composed of 462 females (55.1%) and 377 males (44.9%). This type of research, which employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, aims to elucidate the phenomenon under study and offer an interpretation that facilitates comprehension. In addition to providing an explanation, such an interpretation enables the prediction of future occurrences [19].

A self-administered questionnaire was designed for data collection, comprising 16 Likert-scale items. The questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of ≥ 0.85 (α). Furthermore, two open-ended questions were posed to gain insight into variables pertaining to spiritual lifestyle, namely interiority, community, service, and celebration. In addition, the ethical considerations were in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration guidelines and the ethical code of the American Educational Research Association, which entailed obtaining informed consent and assent from guardians and students. The final aspect, quantitative data analysis, was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics V29.0, while qualitative analysis was performed with the ATLAS.ti 23 software.

4 RESULTS

The results for the category "Interiority" (Figure 1) indicate that approximately half of the responses are associated with positive indexes, with an overall average of 58.4% (n=490) for these two items. Conversely, two items are associated with negative indexes, with an average of 54% (n=452). In the existing literature, this category is related to the capacity of the human being to engage in introspection about themselves. Thus, the processes of introspection are carried out through self-reflection, which allows for the analysis of the individual and the recognition and reflection on the knowledge of the surrounding reality [5].

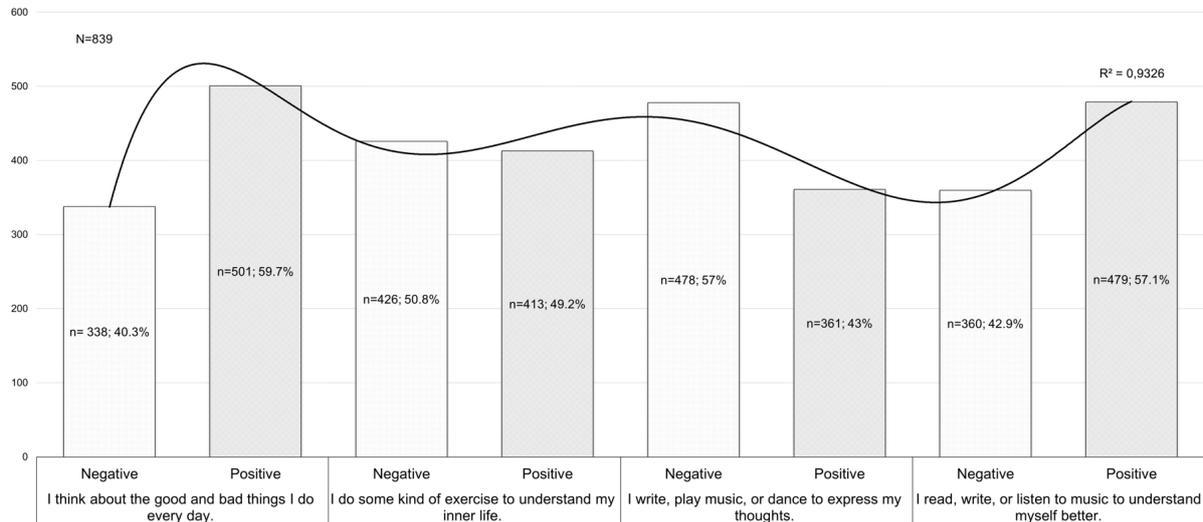


Figure 1. Interiority.

In the process of self-knowledge, the human being is compelled to confront his own voids, difficulties, and realities. This inherently requires a process of interiority, which is indispensable to achieve a genuine understanding of the self and to cultivate the capacity for transformation within one's inner life project. In order to gain self-knowledge, it is necessary to make a conscious effort to explore and recognize those inner spaces where both strengths and vulnerabilities reside [5].

In light of the aforementioned, the results of this category can be justified by the importance of reflecting on one's daily actions and activities. Therefore, spiritual education, which entails understanding oneself, can be achieved by planning and implementing activities that fortify the sensitive, emotional, and transcendental aspects of life. Through daily activities, the objective is to instigate reflection on actions and the positive outcomes of this study, as evidenced by the fact that students engage in reflection on the positive and negative aspects of their daily lives [20].

Figure 2 presents the category "Community," which is understood as a form of social relationship characterized by symmetry, equity, inclusion, participation, cooperation, and collective projects. Consequently, all individuals engaged in a community setting are afforded the opportunity to interact with one another and to be regarded as integral members of a collective comprising individuals who, despite their disparate perspectives, are unified within the same group [21].

As a result, the findings indicate a positive outcome, with an average of 69% (n=579) across all items. This suggests that the elements that constitute the identity of ACODESI can be identified, thereby enabling students to establish connections that foster harmony within the school and family contexts.

The favorable outcomes illustrated in Figure 2 are substantiated by existing literature. This literature demonstrates that relationality serves a clear practical purpose: it enables individuals to seek and establish support systems that, in various forms, enhance the quality of life and offer opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to isolated individuals. This underscores the importance of students having access to trusted individuals with whom they can share their aspirations and visions to guide them in the pursuit of a high quality of life [12].

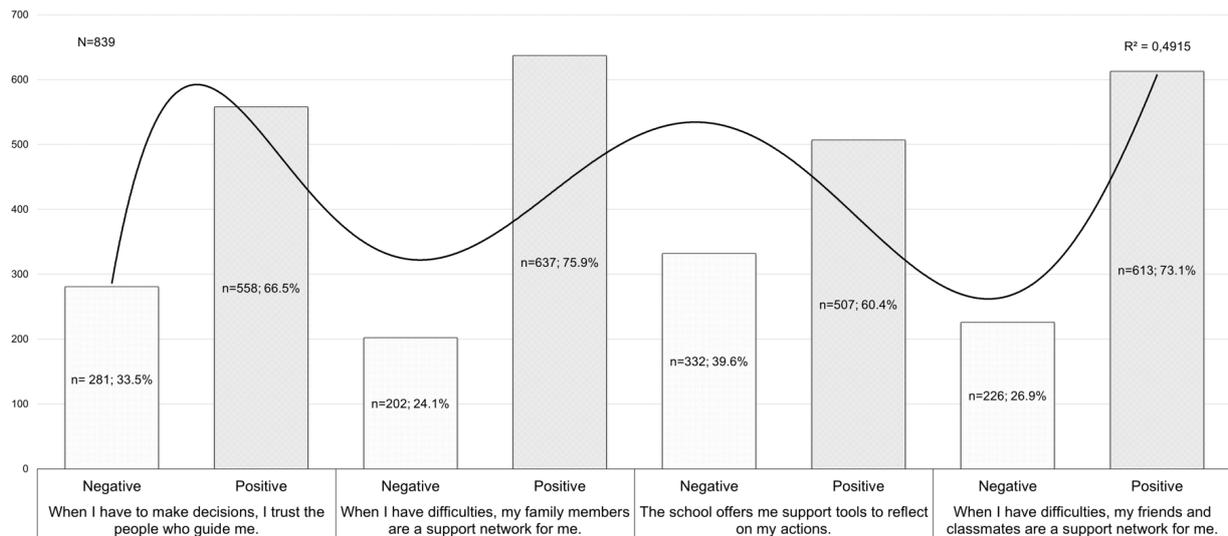


Figure 2. Community.

On the other hand, Figure 3 illustrates the outcomes of the "Service" category, which encompasses the capacity of human beings to transcend their personal interests and adopt an alternative perspective through the utilization of tools that facilitate the advancement of attitudes that enhance the quality of life. In this context, the concept of service extends beyond a singular act and is instead embedded within a lifestyle that is oriented towards the collective good. This encompasses the cultivation of virtues such as generosity, solidarity, and altruism [17].

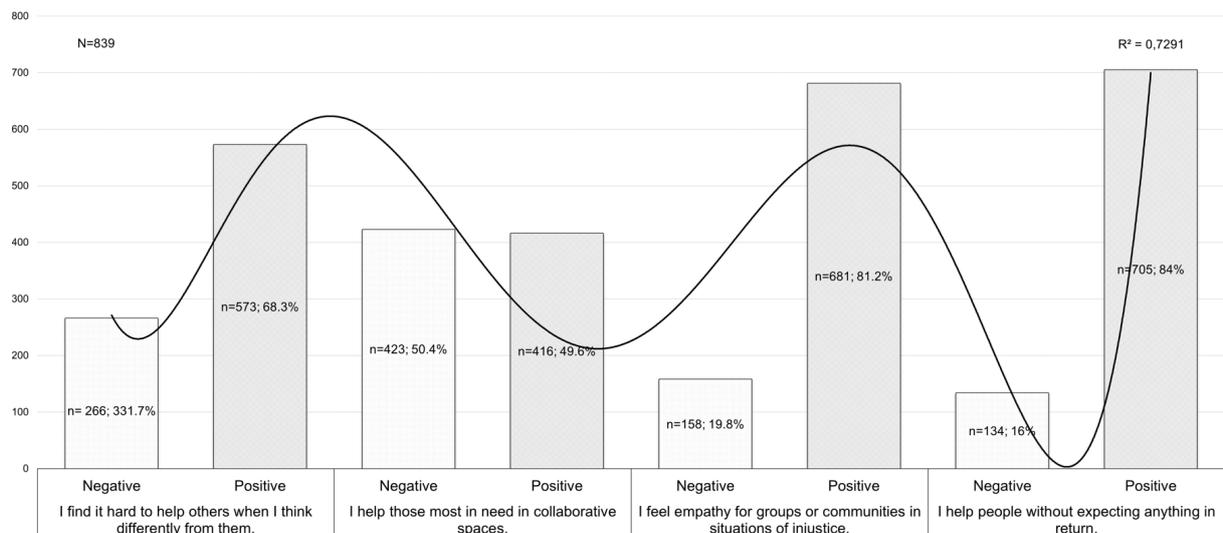


Figure 3. Service.

In this category, positive indicators are evident in three of the four items, with an average of 77.8% (n=653) and a negative index of 50.4% (n=423). These findings are consistent with the tenets of the humanistic approach, which is predicated on the notion that humans have fundamental needs that must be met, including those related to counseling, support, and care services.

As evidenced in the literature, the positive outcomes depicted in Figure 3 can be attributed to the significance of the sense of solidarity fostered among children and young people. The concept of solidarity serves as the conduit through which society and the individual engage in reciprocal and individual interactions within the context of social spheres and rationality, with the aim of fostering the holistic development of each individual without causing harm to others, and where the notion of justice is paramount [22]. Thus, solidarity can be understood as the sentiment that enables us to perceive and assist the other person, irrespective of their beliefs and perspectives.

Figure 4 presents the fourth and final category, entitled "Celebration." This category is defined as an action structured by a set of signs that, when reciprocally articulated, confer a symbolic character [23]. This implies that individuals engage in actions that shape symbols and patterns, thereby facilitating the construction of social and cultural meaning.

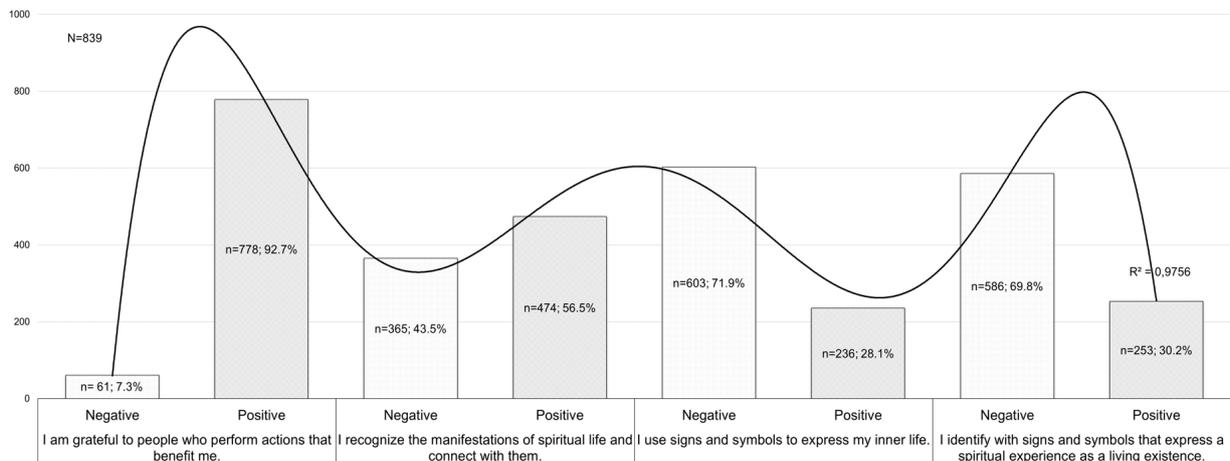


Figure 4. Celebration.

In this category, the positive indexes, with an average of 74.6% (n= 626), and negative indexes, with an average of 70.9% (n=595), demonstrate that students exhibit partial signs of joy or internalized satisfaction from social and cultural actions.

As posited by the extant literature, gratitude represents one of the principal virtues, facilitating reconnection with one's spirituality and enabling its daily practice [23]. It can be concluded that gratitude should be integrated into individuals' daily lives, as it facilitates the establishment of a robust connection with their spirituality and, subsequently, the strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, the implementation of rituals in educational settings provides an opportunity for students to engage in fraternal experiences, which has been shown to contribute to a reduction in violence levels, the strengthening of positive interpersonal relationships, and an enhancement of overall school climate and culture [20]. This evidence supports the assertion that educational institutions should facilitate the creation of spaces that encourage the development of connections with the spiritual dimensions of their students.

In regard to the qualitative approach, it was determined that students are aware that an individual pursuing a spiritual lifestyle must engage in activities such as prayer, meditation, attending Mass and church, having faith, and drawing closer to God. In this context, several components merit particular attention. Spiritual practices indicate that spirituality is not merely a state of being, but rather a quality that can be cultivated through actions and rituals. Each of these practices has the potential to provide a sense of connection, reflection, and inner peace.

Furthermore, the concept of faith can be regarded as a motivating force that provides hope and strength in the face of life's adversities. Similarly, the act of drawing closer to God can be seen as a pursuit of a relationship and understanding with something greater than oneself. This can impart a sense of purpose and direction in the educational context. This suggests that spirituality is not an isolated aspect of life but can influence the way one lives each day. This implies an integration of spirituality across all areas of life, from everyday decisions to interpersonal relationships [3]. A word cloud was constructed based on the findings of this study (see Figure 5).

develop attitudes of assistance regardless of differences in opinion, and it is also presented as an opportunity to help those in need, without expecting anything in return. Fourth and lastly, celebration is presented, where the students' gratitude, the manifestations of spiritual life, the use and identification with signs and symbols are evidenced.

The contributions made by this article to the investigation of the phenomenon of spirituality and lifestyle are acknowledged. However, it should be noted that this study has also had some limitations, including the differing perspectives of ACODESI on the subject of spirituality and the categories that comprise it. Additionally, given the relatively limited research on this phenomenon, there were significant challenges in identifying authors who had previously addressed this subject and provided support for it.

Based on the preceding evidence, it can be posited that the future will see an increased need for educators to facilitate the creation of spaces and attitudes conducive to fostering spiritual connection amongst their pupils. This can be achieved by employing strategies that reinforce student well-being through pedagogical approaches that address educational contexts. Such strategies should prioritize attention to student needs, the prevention of potential difficulties, and the fostering of self-reflection, with a view to enhancing the quality of life of students and promoting lifestyles that embrace spirituality and contribute to the cultivation of healthy habits.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This research is part of the research project registered with the Vice Rector's Office for Research No. 20850, entitled "Pedagogical strategy to redesign habits and behaviors that contribute to the development of lifestyles in children and young people (7 to 17 years old) of the schools of the Asociación de Colegios Jesuitas de Colombia – ACODESI".

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