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The role of spirituality in building up the resilience of migrant children in Central America: bridging the gap between needs and responses*

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ABSTRACT

Academic research across different disciplines has evidenced that spirituality contributes significantly to the building up of resilience. Little research, however, exists on the relationship between spirituality and resilience among displaced children. Enquiring into this particular area is urgent not only because of the increasing numbers of displaced children in the world today but also because of the insufficiency of current responses, which fail to address children's deep questions about life, themselves, the world and God. This paper argues that spirituality has the potential to answer these deep existential needs, and, by doing so, can constitute a key resilience factor for migrant children. Furthermore, it argues for the value of using interdisciplinary approaches to explore these issues. Through a qualitative investigation involving adult professionals working with migrant children and adult faith leaders and/or experts in spirituality, this paper provides new insights into how to understand the relationship between spirituality and resilience among displaced populations, and how to nurture migrant children's spirituality in multi-faith and non-faith settings.

Introduction and purpose of the present study

The relationship between spirituality and resilience has been enquired into by academic researchers across different disciplines, especially around people experiencing death (Greef et al. 2008, 293), violent trauma (Connor et al. 2003, 491), war (Fernando et al. 2011, 55), austerity (Sharma and Hopkins 2013, 4) and chronic disease (Rodríguez et al. 2011, 26). Some of these studies have shown that spirituality provides people with meaning in life, helps them to make sense of suffering, to experience what Echard calls a a 'realistic hope' and peace (as cited in Vanistendael 2007, 127), to find a sense of support and protection and to cope with the stressors and uncertainties associated with difficulties (Tanyi 2002, 503).

However, further research is needed with different groups and within more diverse socio-cultural and religious contexts in order to validate and generalise these existing conclusions about the positive contribution of spirituality to resilience and well-being (Rodríguez et al. 2011, 26).

One of the contexts where the relationship between spirituality and resilience is still underestimated, unexplored and under-applied is among migrant children.[1] Research in this field is particularly urgent because of the increasing numbers of children fleeing their countries due to persecution, conflict, generalised violence or poverty. In fact, it has been estimated that the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had surpassed 60 million by mid-2015 (UNHCR 2015, 3) and that at least half of these people were under the age of 20 (McLeigh 2013, 1058; Save the Children 2014). Tackling refugee children's needs is of foremost importance as, first, they are holders of rights according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and are entitled to special protection and humanitarian assistance under article 22 (UN 1989, 6). Second, they are particularly vulnerable to systematic violations of their rights, including deprivation, forced labour, trafficking, sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect and violence (UNICEF 2012, 1; ACNUR 2013, 20). And third, as neuroscience affirms, during childhood, critical changes take place, affecting physical and mental health, adaptability to change, lifelong learning abilities and resilience (NDSU 2009, 3); thus, toxic stress caused by experiences of great adversity can have lifelong effects on children, preventing them from developing fully and reaching their potential (Middlebrooks and Audage 2008, 6; UNICEF 2014, 6). In addition to this, recent research has evidenced that the current responses to the needs of migrant children are not enough as the hardship they face in their countries of origin, during transit and in destination countries can be so serious that their vision of the world, understanding of life, conception of God and perception of themselves can be deeply affected (Mann 2012, 455). Understanding spirituality as 'the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred' (Puchalski 2009, 804), this paper argues that spirituality has the potential to answer to these deep existential needs, and, by doing so, can constitute a key resilience factor for people in adversity, including migrant children.

Dialoguing with different disciplines including sociology, anthropology, psychology, development studies and theology, this research article focuses on the context of migrant children in Central America, as in this tiny region, an 'undeclared regional war' has been going on due to the high rates of homicide, violence, proliferation of illegal weapons and the growing presence of organised crime. As a result, the numbers of people fleeing to the United States (MPI 2016, 3) has increased with levels unseen since 1980s (ACNUR 2014, 12). Although the risks and impacts of migration on children can vary depending on gender, country of origin, ethnic origin and age (ACNUR 2014, 15), like all migrant children, the children who migrate within Central America – whether or not accompanied – are subject to a double invisibility: they are migrants and they are children. As such, they are denied access to essential public services like housing, health care and education, leaving them in conditions of extreme deprivation in overcrowded and unsafe shelters, which is detrimental for their healthy development, protection and well-being (Wessells and Kostelny 2013, 30). In addition, when entering a foreign territory, as children are regarded as threats or offenders against migration laws, they are often criminalised, detained and deported. Studies have

shown that uncertainty, anxiety and the fear of being deported can leave permanent negative effects on migrant and refugee children's mental and physical health (UNICEF 2006, 201; ACNUR 2013, 27). Fearful of being detained, children on the move are often reluctant to rely on local authorities or legal shelters for their protection, preferring to take alternative routes – 'blind points' – which increases their risk of being tackled by organised crime networks associated with kidnapping, extortion, sexual abuse and exploitation, robbery, smuggling, trafficking and other illegal activities (ACNUR 2014, 7).

Through an exploratory qualitative investigation involving adult professionals working with migrant children and adult faith leaders and/or experts in spirituality, this research paper aims to answer two main questions: (1) Is spirituality important for Central American migrant children's resilience and, if so, what is spirituality's particular contribution? and (2) Is it possible to nurture migrant children's spirituality in multi-faith and non-faith settings and, if so, how can this be done? The paper will do this, first, by presenting what existing research says about spirituality and the migration of children, and, then, by focusing on the findings and implications of the empirical research.

The existing research on spirituality and migrant children

Migrant children's needs vs. traditional responses: bridging the gap

At the global level, a framework that has often been used to prioritise the types of responses required to meet the needs of children involved in forced migration is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), with its five-stage pyramidal shape that communicates that the most fundamental needs – at the bottom – have to be fulfilled in order to achieve the higher levels of growth and development. Therefore, survival and physiological needs – the need of air, food, clothing and shelter – are at the bottom of the pyramid. This is followed by safety and security, love and belonging and, finally, self-esteem and self-actualisation, at the top of the pyramid (Freitas and Leonard 2011, 9). Although this framework is useful for practical purposes, it has been widely criticised for its simplistic and static conceptualisation of human needs. In fact, field experience and research have shown that the relationship between Maslow's Needs is dynamic and inter-independent rather than, as the pyramidal shape suggests, hierarchical (McLeod 2014). In practice, successful strategies to help migrant and refugee children overcome the adversity they face once they leave their countries of origin have gone beyond the 'physiological needs' of Maslow's bottom layer – such as shelter, food and clothing – and have included the provision of humanitarian assistance in relation to physical and mental health, family reunification, access to school, opportunities to play and vocational training as ways to provide special protection to migrant boys and girls (Mann 2012, 449).

However, despite this will to go beyond basic needs, some researchers have argued that the responses to migrant children's needs are still not adequate, as the daily challenges they face are so hard that they are usually led to ask very deep questions about the existence of God, the purpose of their life, their sense of being alive and their worth as human beings (Mann 2012, 455). This is what educator and anthropologist Gillian Mann discovered among displaced Congolese children living in Tanzania. Listening to the children's narratives led her to conclude that their illegal or 'refugee' status, the hostile environment, the lack of access to services, the conditions of poverty and the limited social support resulted in a life

characterised by constant fear, isolation and disappointment. This had a direct impact on how they perceived themselves – a 'lost generation', a 'waste' – and how they viewed life – 'miserable', 'worse than anything ever experienced', 'boring and meaningless' (Mann 2012, 254). In fact, as their present was marked by strong feelings of humiliation, suffering and hopelessness, the children were no longer able to imagine their future, which was undermining their humanity because 'it was the very idea of a future that motivated them to make it through the day ahead' (Mann 2012, 456). This is what Mann called a 'spiritual death, in which life has no meaning' (Mann 2012, 458). These findings resonate with research in Latin America among forcibly displaced populations that affirm that, in addition to the physical difficulties, migrants face other challenges related to finding a new sense to life, a meaning to loss, building relationships with new people and in a new environment and the redefinition of their identity (Gómez 2012, 65).

Janoff-Bulman explains this reality through his Assumptive Worlds Theory, which states that experiences of serious adversity and suffering impact three types of assumptions: (1) the belief in the goodness of the world; (2) the belief that the world and life are meaningful; and (3) the belief in one's own worth and value (1983, 3–6). Such a sense of insecurity, helplessness and powerlessness cannot be effectively tackled through traditional humanitarian assistance but rather suggests a need to address questions related to a deeper dimension of life and self – questions related to spirituality – in order to respond to the needs of migrant children effectively and help them overcome the difficulties they face. The section below aims at defining the concept of 'spirituality' and children's spirituality, based on existing research from different disciplines and approaches.

Defining spirituality and setting up the challenge to understand children's spirituality

Spirituality comes from the Latin *spiritus* which means 'breath of life' (Elkins et al. 1988, 10). It differs from religion, as religion is 'an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed: (1) To facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent; and (2) To foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in living together in community' (Koening et al. in Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude 2003, 209). Thus, a person can be 'spiritual' even though not identified with a religion (Elkins et al. 1988, 8; Giacalone, Jurkiewicz, and Dunn 2005, 59; Tanyi 2002, 500).

Anthropology has evidenced the predisposition of humans towards spirituality throughout history and across cultures (Rodríguez et al. 2011, 28; Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude 2003, 208). Some scientists have even proposed theories such as the 'God Spot' and 'Mystique Mind' to explain the biological and physiological roots of spirituality (Alper 2008, 93; Boff 2012). More recently, an emerging field of research – neurotheology or 'spiritual neuroscience' – has integrated disciplines as diverse as psychology, anthropology, neuroscience, philosophy and theology to try to understand the brain's reactions to spiritual experience (Sayadmansour 2014, 52). Although these theories have received critiques for their lack of scientific demonstrability, many researchers still believe that human beings are 'wired for spirit', which means that there seems to be a human predisposition to spirituality (Kyriacou 2016, 12). This is consistent with de Souza's affirmation that spirituality is 'an essential human characteristic which is at the core of and is reflected in all aspects of human existence' (de Souza 2012, 1). From this perspective, spirituality is conceived of as an intrinsic human

capacity that is deeply interconnected with other human dimensions like the physical, emotional, social and intellectual ones (Benson 2010, 205).

Concerning children's spirituality, some decades ago, in an attempt to conceptualise children's spirituality and provide a framework that could be used regardless of culture and faith background, Fowler (1995, 117) proposed six stages of faith development, based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Some years later, contrary to Fowler's assumption that small children cannot understand or experience spirituality, Rebecca Nye (a psychologist, researcher and lecturer on children's spirituality) found that childhood was a stage at which spiritual awareness was particularly natural and common (Nye 2009, 9). According to Nye, capturing children's own spiritual experiences, views and questions required moving beyond the adult perspective, which made it particularly challenging (Nye 2009, 7). Thus, Nye defined children's spirituality as:

> an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences. This awareness can be conscious or unconscious, and sometimes fluctuates between both, but in both cases can affect actions, feelings and thoughts […] This encounter with transcendence can happen in specific experiences or moments, as well as through imaginative or reflective activity (thoughts and making meaning). (Nye 2009, 9)

These findings have both conceptual and practical implications for this study. On the one hand, if children are spiritual beings and have an experience of the sacred (even if they cannot express it in grown-up words), any intention to nurture their spirituality needs to start at very early stages, considering their developmental capacities. On the other hand, it means that children are not 'empty vessels' in need of filling by adults with religious knowledge; on the contrary, if children are more likely to be aware of spiritual matters, it is adults who might need to learn from them (Nye 2009, 17). Finally, considering children as 'spiritual beings' should lead adults to see them more as agents of their own spiritual development, which implies finding ways to recognise it, express it and facilitate it (Nye 2009, 19). The section below focuses on existing findings concerning the faith and resilience of migrant people.

Religiosity and migrant people's resilience

Ann Masten, an expert on the subject, defines childhood resilience as 'the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' (1990, 426; Barba Camacho 2012, 207; Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, and Ager 2015, 1). In the case of migrant children, resilience relates to the various ways in which the children respond to the challenges they face in transit and in their destination countries, turning from 'passive victims' into 'active survivors' (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010, 227).

Various studies conducted among migrant populations from different cultural and religious backgrounds have affirmed that spirituality and religion facilitated the adaptation processes, generated new social senses (Gómez 2012, 61) and enhanced a person's psychological and physical well-being (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012, 61). Clark's 2004 study of Bosnian Muslim refugees in Chicago revealed that religious beliefs and spirituality could be counted as resilience factors as they provided meaning to the experience of displacement, which helped the refugees to adapt and survive as a minority and excluded group, especially after the terrorist attacks in New York on 9/11 (Rodríguez et al. 2011, 35). Similarly, in a study carried out among unaccompanied children from Africa, Asia and Europe from Christian and

Muslim backgrounds living in Ireland, Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) identified six concrete coping strategies children adopted to overcome the difficulties they faced. Although it was not the focus of that research, religion and religious beliefs were found to be important in all of the six strategies (227). Some children mentioned, for example, that their faith was something that they could carry to their new country, even if they had to adapt it to their new environment (229). Other children identified God as their source of protection, support and hope – 'I believe He's the one that's still protecting me' (230) – which helped them to see their reality in a more positive way. This explains why fostering a close relationship with God was so important for them – 'I pray for God to help me' (231). Furthermore, some children suggested that a physical intervention from God had provided them with help: 'I believe He's the one that sent the man to help me. I believe He's the one that brought me to this country'. (230)

Within the Latin American context, a research study of Central American migrants in a transit shelter in Mexico concluded that the most important factors that helped them build up their resilience were: trustful relations; support from religious organisations including shelters; hope for the future; value systems and beliefs; creativity and persistence; problem-solving; and self-awareness (Barral 2009, 47). All of these are related to spirituality, according to Puchalski's definition. In addition – and similarly to Ni Raghallaigh et al. – this research highlighted the existing close relationship between a migrant's faith and their capacity for resilience. This was reflected in expressions like 'My strength only comes from God'; 'I always trust God'; and 'God has helped me' (Barral 2009, 45). Likewise, a study of the role of spirituality in the context of internal displacement in Colombia – where more than 5 million people were forcibly displaced between 1985 and 2010 – found that spirituality provided redemption and healing through the practice of religious rituals and the provision of a supporting community (Gómez 2012, 72). Both of these studies also showed that fostering a relationship with transcendence (in this case, God) allowed the displaced people to find a meaning to their suffering, a sense of belonging, protection, an inner strength and hope for their future, which were critical for them to continue their journey even in the most challenging moments (Barral 2009, 47; Gómez 2012, 61). Furthermore, Gomez argued, having grown up within a Christian 'logic', most people do not only 'want' but 'need' to find meaning and sense through transcendence, for better or for worse (Gómez 2012, 78). Gomez's study ended up proposing that spirituality is 'a social construct of words, concepts, rites and myths that allow displaced people to make sense of the world and create a response (often not entirely satisfactory, but response after all) to the events that occurred to them' (Gómez 2012, 82).

Thus, whether it is a belief 'in a higher power, calling on dead relatives or something deep inside', it is suggested that believing in transcendence helps many refugee people to cope through hard times (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012, 61). Figure 1 summarises the relationship between spirituality and resilience based on existing research. However, serious studies on the role of spirituality – rather than faith or religion – in migrants' resilience are still only few in number. The challenge to discover the role of spirituality in migrants' resilience is even bigger when talking about displaced young people specifically, as there is even less available research for this group. The present study takes up this challenge, aiming to provide concrete insights on why and how spirituality may help migrant children to cope with adversity. The next section presents the research method used and the main findings obtained.
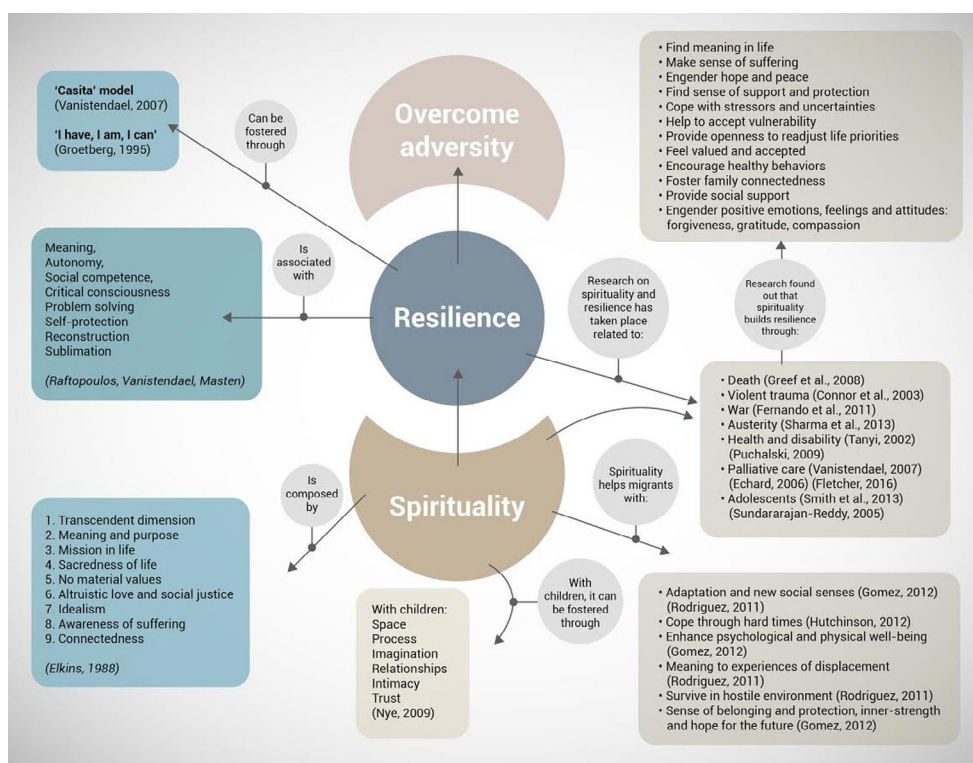
Figure 1. The relationship between resilience and spirituality from the Literature Review (Andrade 2016, 36).

The present study on migrant children's spirituality and resilience

The methodology used for the empirical research in this study

The present qualitative study was implemented through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in order to obtain deep and meaningful responses (Biggam 2011, 146). The sample consisted of two different groups of adults: (1) professionals who are working or have previously worked with migrant children; and (2) faith leaders and/or experts in spirituality.

Out of the nine adults who participated in the interviews, seven were field workers and two were faith leaders or experts on spirituality. Two of the field workers were also faith leaders. The ages of the children that the adults worked with varied as, due to the relatively recent increase of child migration at the time of the study, refugee shelters were not prepared to provide age-appropriate support to displaced children. However, statistics show that most unaccompanied children are beyond the age of 11 (ACNUR 2013, 16).

Table 1 below shows how the diversity of the participants provided perspectives and insights that were interdisciplinary, intercultural and inter-religious, which enriched the study significantly.

Although interviewing the migrant children themselves would have been clearly interesting for the purpose of this research, it was judged to be very high risk ethically for a

Table 1. Description of the participants in the research (Andrade 2016, 40).

#	Names/Categories	Gender		Location			Religious identity					Professional background		Other		Nature of the organization
		F	M	Latin America	Other	Comment	Catholic	Protestant	Muslim	Religious non-practicing	Atheist	Field worker with refugees	Faith/Spiritual leader	Researcher	Former migrant	
1	Participant A	1		1			1					1			1	Large INGO, Latin American Branch
2	Participant B		1	1			1						1	1		UK University/Catholic charity in Mexico
3	Participant C	1		1			1					1	1			Catholic mission working with displaced population in Mexico
4	Participant D	1		1			1					1				Catholic mission working with displaced population in Mexico
5	Participant E	1		1			1					1				Large INGO, Mexico office
6	Participant F	1		1						1		1				Catholic shelter for refugees in Mexco
7	Participant G		1	1				1					1			Latin American Protestant Church
8	Participant H	1			1	UK			1			1				UK charity working with refugees
9	Participant I	1			1	UK					1		1	1		Association that promotes reflection and research on children's spirituality
		7	2	7	2		5	1	1	1	1	7	4	2	1	

number of reasons, including the potential distress for the children that could result from remembering and talking about their migration journey. As a result, it was considered that interviewing migrant children themselves in this research could have been potentially harmful for them without appropriate techniques, support and follow-up. As the research was carried out among adult professionals with significant field experience with displaced children and/or significant understanding of issues related to spirituality, it was considered to be low risk in terms of ethical aspects. King's College London granted Full ethics approval to this study, provided that participants were aware of the objectives, scope, risks and questions in advance, and gave their informed consent to be interviewed, either in writing or orally, as appropriate. Additionally, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms for the participants and a general description for the type organisation, rather than its real name.

The main findings of the research

The nine semi-structured interviews conducted resulted in findings of which some were consistent with studies cited in the first section. However, new and original insights also emerged from the interview process. This section will focus on three of the key findings.

(1) Spirituality is a key element in building up resilience in Central American migrant children

When asked about the specific challenges faced by migrant children, almost all of the participants identified challenges that deal with deep issues like the meaning of life and connectedness. They noted that: '(migrant children) have been detached from their land', 'they arrive in an unknown place and need to share everything with unknown people', 'they need to revive and process many traumatic experiences', 'they do not understand why they are being imprisoned in order to be protected', 'they feel unprotected and under constant threat' and 'once they arrive in the destination country, they need to adapt and become immersed in a new culture'. These responses echo what was found in some studies cited above (e.g., Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010); Barral 2009; Gómez 2012; Rodríguez et al. 2011; Mann 2012) and highlight the extent to which their identity, references in life, certainties and hope can seem to be lost once they embark on the migratory journey. Some participants stressed the particular contribution made by spiritual care, in contrast to other interventions like psycho-social therapy, as it includes the dimensions related to transcendence, mystery and deep beliefs:

> I completely believe […] that spirituality is what allows migrants to have hope that their dreams can become true, hope that they are somehow protected beyond human reach. […] They know that a superior being is protecting them and will guide them to their destination. […] They usually bring such an incredible strength that lifts them up from every atrocity, even after being kidnapped or having had a part of their body amputated on the train. (Participant A)

> When migrants see such difficulties facing them and do not see any solution, spirituality allows them to 'see' more than what they have in front of them. The impossible becomes possible. This gives them the strength they need to continue fighting. (Participant G)

Additionally, the interviewees repeatedly stressed that, in Latin America particularly, migrants were 'people of faith' or 'spiritual people' who see God like their 'travelling

companion who blesses and protects them'. Sometimes that faith is externally expressed through religious images, religious tattoos, the Bible or symbols like the cross, which reflect a mixture of spirituality, faith and religion. The following testimony suggests that a strong faith is one of the reasons why it is very difficult to dissuade migrant people from embarking on such a dangerous journey simply by providing information about the risks:

> I remember when I went to the United States as a migrant. I was 17 years old and my only prayer while I was crossing the border was that if God wanted me there, He would make things happen. […] Today, when I hear migrants share their experiences and see how certain they are that they are going to reach their goal, I realize how much spiritual strength they have. It is not easy to make them change their minds, as they are driven by something inside them that goes beyond them. The hope of a better life and the certainty that God is with them is stronger than any risk. Many of them don't even practice a religion, but they still say that God is accompanying them. It is incredible. (Participant A)

Thus, the empirical research affirmed that spirituality is present in children's experiences of migration, although the distinction between faith, religiosity and spirituality seems not always to be clear.

(2) Migrant children's spirituality can be nurtured through ordinary, day-to-day activities

There are many theories and models regarding ways to nurture children and young people's spirituality and Vanistendael (2007, 119) and Grotberg (1995, 9) proposed two of them. However, little has been proposed for the specific context of children on the move. This study's empirical research provided useful insights into ways of providing spiritual care to migrant children. Analysis of the data leads to five main principles for supporting migrant children: (1) the approach to spirituality has to be intercultural and inter-religious; (2) spiritual care needs to be interdisciplinary; (3) spiritual care has to be grounded in children's recognition and reinforcement of their strengths as survivors; (4) the approach to spirituality should help children accept and give a new meaning to their traumatic experiences, instead of suppressing and denying them; and (5) spirituality is fostered when ordinary things are approached in a way that makes them become extraordinary.

Table 2 sets out suggestions provided by the interviewees of concrete ways to nurture migrant children's spirituality, considering the lack of stability and limited resources they have in transit and destination countries. These activities have been divided into three sections: (1) 'ordinary activities', referring to those daily actions which can become opportunities to nurture spirituality; (2) 'special activities', which need to be planned and require a specific moment and/or place but are not necessarily associated with spirituality; and (3) 'religious activities' that are commonly associated with religious practice and constitute recognised ways to foster spirituality.

The notable majority of 'ordinary activities' provided by the participants reflects the extent to which they conceived spirituality as integrated in people's lives and the way it could be nurtured through ordinary, daily life activities and personal attitudes:

> So, you don't need special spaces to build their (migrant children's) spirituality. It is in the way you welcome and receive them, the way you approach and interact with them. All this nurtures their spirituality and fosters resilience. (Participant A)

Thus, the second key finding is that the 'ordinary can be spiritual', so spiritual development can take place in any setting, without the need of a particular infrastructure or additional costs. Consequently, in the context of forced migration, very basic activities such as resting, sharing a meal and walking outside (without hiding) can be key to helping people find sense from their suffering, rebuild their identity and connect to themselves, to the moment they are living, to others and to transcendence. And, in the case of children, as has been argued in relation to other emergency contexts (Wessells and Kostelny 2013, 29), play will always need to be included in any type of response.

(3) Intentionality and spiritual awareness are two important prerequisites for spiritual care

When asked about the most appropriate organisations or people to foster migrant children's spirituality, most of the participants mentioned refugee organisations and workers, as it is they who have the closest contact with these children. The interviewees also mentioned faith organisations and spiritual leaders, as it was argued that spiritual care without adequate preparation could do more harm by generating more distress and guilt. Finally, other children and families were cited, as peer support contributes to healing, hope-engendering and meaning-making.

So, according to the majority of the participants, it appears that special titles or training are not prerequisites for nurturing migrant children's spirituality; however, two main conditions arose: spiritual awareness and intentionality:

> Any individual can do it, but he or she needs to have a sort of consciousness of human enquiries about life such as: who are we, what are we doing, a life project, an objective, something basic. I don't think that we need to be 'illuminated people' – I don't know anyone like this – but he or she has to show that, somehow, he or she has a living spirituality. (Participant F)

> … I would rather say that it can be anyone that also lives out his or her spirituality. That person has to understand it and live some of it; otherwise he or she is going to look with scepticism at migrants' experiences or practices. (Participant E)

Thus, the third key finding is that it is important, on the one hand, to be aware that spirituality deals with issues related to the meaning of life, the perception of self and connectedness – to self, others, nature and transcendence – to have a sort of experience with it and to acknowledge that it can help migrant children build resilience. On the other hand, it is important to be intentional in nurturing spirituality through ordinary life, behaviours and attitudes. Although these two conditions might not seem difficult to find in some contexts, it cannot be taken for granted especially in secularised societies, where professionals and volunteers working with migrant children don't necessarily adhere to a faith tradition or don't recognise themselves as 'spiritual persons'. In those contexts, this study highlighted the need for professionals and volunteers who have, at least, a basic knowledge of faith and spirituality which would allow them to understand the migrant children's mind-set and, thus, be more effective in their support.

This need for spiritual awareness among practitioners working with displaced populations has been addressed by some researchers. Hutchinson, for example, believes that, as spirituality and religion are part of many migrants' belief systems, these need to be taken into account in order to 'operationalize resilience factors' (2012, 70). Furthermore, he argues that a general spiritual awareness is not enough, as merely 'knowing' about spirituality does not

Table 2. Activities that nurture migrant children's spirituality, according to the empirical research (Andrade 2016, 54).

Ordinary activities	Special activities	Religious activities
Welcoming introductions	*Meditation*	*Religious rituals (individually or in a group)*
Sharing own experiences with newcomers to give them hope and a sense of belonging. It helps to make people feel at home.	Pauses from noise and distractions to be in silence and connect with self and/or transcendence.	Prayer, scripture reading, worship and symbolic liturgies.
Resting	*Circles of reflection*	*Fraternal celebration*
Rest restores the spirit. Migrant children need to get peace back through sleeping and resting.	Time for introspection using child-friendly methodologies.	A weekly meeting in chapel to share thoughts about life, human nature, purpose, challenges, etc. beyond religious beliefs.
Sharing food	*Resources on spirituality*	*Spiritual retreats*
Food allows migrant children to recover strength but it can go beyond that; it is a special moment of sharing, connecting to others and exercising gratitude.	Provision of resources for children that address spirituality through tales, stories, theatre, etc.	Individually or in groups.
Walking outside	*Mutual help role-playing*	*Pastoral care*
Going around without hiding and without fear of being detained helps children connect to their environment and gain a sense of freedom.	Role-play stressing mutual help. Fosters self-esteem, solidarity, humility and gratefulness.	Spiritual counsellors that provide 'psychological first aid' to help children develop coping strategies through making meaning, a sense of connectedness, a life purpose, self-esteem, humour and the development of their own capacities.
Fostering respect	*Parental support*	*Religious narratives*
Expressed through every relationship.	Helping parents to help their children through quality time and loving care.	Can help explain the causes of disasters and have the potential to strengthen resilience.
Building relationships and community support	*Art, music, nature*	*Dynamics inspired by sacred texts*
Every moment is an opportunity to build trustful and respectful relationships.	Activities bringing harmony and connection to the inner self.	Choosing texts that tackle issues related to hope, peace, security, courage, solidarity and God's protection.
Giving thanks	*Gardening*	
For the day, for life, for being alive, etc. Fosters gratitude and a positive attitude towards life.	Provides an opportunity to reflect on life, renewal, starting again, being useful and a sense of responsibility.	
Positive sentences	*Capturing places*	
Words have power. Talking positively helps put stress on opportunities rather than difficulties.	Young people take pictures of the neighbourhood then use them to talk about experiences, feelings and desires.	
Observing thoughts		
Observation of thoughts: What are they? Where do they come from? How do they make me feel?		
The nightmare-destroying monster		
A children's ally that takes problems away.		
The sorrow-removing friend		
A character that hears children's problems and takes them away.		
Playing		
Safe places in which to play freely and discovery through games, stories and movies.		

imply understanding it, nor does it prevent a person from judging or guarantee the ability to develop appropriate interventions that, according to Hodge are 'relevant and sensitive to a client's spiritual worldview' (as cited in Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012, 70). For instance, Hutchinson and Dorsett propose the concept of 'spiritual competency', which requires practitioners to explore and develop their own 'spiritual and religious values, beliefs and biases to consider what influence they may have on client assessment, engagement and interventions processes' (Hutchinson and Dorsett 2012, 70). Similarly, Fletcher created a spiritual screening tool – *Connecto* – which aims at helping interdisciplinary spiritual care teams to identify 'strengths of connectedness' (with self, others, nature and transcendence) and 'vulnerabilities of disconnectedness' in order to provide holistic palliative care (Fletcher 2016). Finally, Rodriguez, in Colombia, advocates for the inclusion of spiritual care in the formal undergraduate and postgraduate training of psychologists, as, she argues:

> A professional that does not take into account, does not understand enough about or ignores the religious/spiritual dimension of an individual or community, conceiving it as a cognitive obstacle or a least important dimension for human development, is likely to be denying the most important aspect of his patient and of himself as instrument of healing and resilience. (Rodríguez et al. 2011, 44)

To conclude this section, the figure below summarises some of the findings from the present empirical study, and highlights its contribution to the existing research on migrant children's spirituality and resilience (Figure 2).
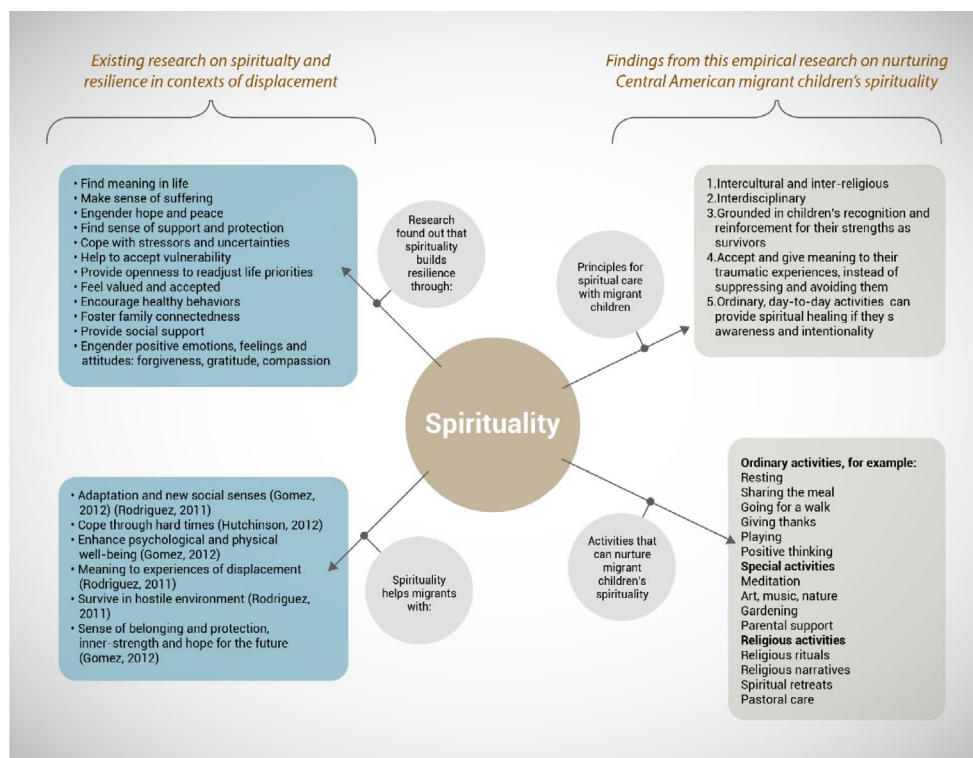
Figure 2. The role of spirituality in migrant children's resilience, according to the Literature Review and the present empirical research (Andrade 2016, 63).

Implications and recommendations for future research

According to the adult interviewees in this empirical research, spirituality plays a key role for Central American migrant children's resilience, as it helps them address: their conception of and personal purpose in life ('Is life worth living? Why is life unfair? What is my purpose in life?'); the meaning of life events and the processing of suffering and loss ('Why is this happening to me? Is God punishing me? Why does God allow suffering?'); the perception of self and of others ('Who am I? Am I of value? Do others have more value than me? Why do people hurt each other?'); relationships with others, the environment and God ('Why are people closing the borders? Why are people afraid of us? Does God exist? If so, why is He not listening?'); and the perception of the future ('What can I expect from life? Is it worthwhile to fight for survival? Am I going to get better?'). In addition, this empirical research provided new insights into how to foster spirituality among migrant and refugee children, considering the instability of their circumstances and the limited resources. Hinting at Masten's expression about resilience –'ordinary magic' (Masten 2001, 227) – and referring to the way it is built up through ordinary life processes, this research concluded that, when talking about spirituality, the ordinary has the potential to become spiritual if there is awareness and intentionality. For instance, for a Central American migrant boy or girl, ordinary activities such as resting, sharing a meal, being part of a football team, listening to music, planting a tree and going out for a walk have the potential to become more healing than religious rituals. This means that resilience can successfully be promoted through intentional programmes and policies which increase children's opportunities to develop fully despite adversity, and that spirituality can play a role in these (Masten 2001, 227).

Although the sample is small, and generalisations cannot be made, this study potentially offers concrete implications for the work with migrant children. In a broader sense, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (UN 1989, 12). In the case of displaced children, because of the harsh loss and suffering that they experience throughout their journey, their right to spiritual care is particularly necessary to help them regain meaning, hope and strength – in other words, to build resilience. This right should be approached from an interdisciplinary, intercultural and inter-religious perspective, with spirituality being promoted even in secular and non-faith settings, as it has been argued that it is possible to think about spirituality without religion (Solomon 2002, 24). For this to happen, a clearer distinction between 'spirituality', 'religion' and 'faith' needs to be made, as well as further research carried out into expressions of spirituality in different sociocultural, economic, political and religious contexts.

On the other hand, including spirituality as a key factor for building up migrant children's resilience in the existing programmes designed for them could contribute significantly to enhancing children's overall well-being and, consequently, to a most visible and sustainable impact. In this context, it is necessary to be intentional in the way spirituality and resilience within migrant children are addressed at a policy level, as it requires that policies and programmes exist, together with an allocated budget, training and staff in order to: ensure children's protection and access to basic services; promote their integration into society; encourage family reunification; and so on. These elements are important for resilience as they influence children's sense of safety, stability, trust in people, understanding of the world as a good place and confidence that things are going to be better.

Finally, as human beings are holistic and all human phenomena are complex, spirituality needs to be addressed from an interdisciplinary approach as the combination of experiences, concepts and theories from different fields can contribute to a better understanding. In the case of displaced children, a serious and engaged dialogue between disciplines as diverse as theology, physical and mental health studies, anthropology, neuroscience, politics and human rights is especially needed in order to have a clear picture of the causes and effects of displacement and, subsequently, of the contribution that spirituality can make to children's recovery and flourishing.

Note

1. Although international law differentiates 'migrants', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers' on the basis of their reasons for travelling, this paper will use these terms interchangeably, as, despite the special protection refugees are supposedly entitled to, the reality shows that refugee and migrant children are exposed to similar situations of vulnerability in transit and in their destination countries (UNHCR 2014, 8).

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The author has over 15 years of experience in holistic development, children's rights, advocacy and international cooperation at the national and global levels, with involvement in projects in more than 15 countries. She is a life-long learner, passionate about childhood, human flourishing, justice and spirituality. She was awarded an Excellence Scholarship by the Ecuadorian Government and graduated from King's College London with Distinction, where she also received the Sean Devane prize for the best dissertation. Maria is the Theology and Network Engagement Manager for Latin America and Caribbean at Tearfund UK and is an independent researcher on spirituality, child protection and resilience in fragile contexts as an independent researcher.

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