

Article

It Is Never Too Early: Social Participation of Early Childhood Education Students from the Perspective of Families, Teachers and Students

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to delve into social participation in early childhood education classrooms of centres that include students with ASD, considering social participation as a fundamental element to understand inclusion. To this end, we propose a Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods approach. A quantitative study was carried out with the participation of 85 Early Childhood Education students from centres that include students with ASD. Information was gathered through attitude and social support questionnaires. Six families and eight professionals of these centres participated in the qualitative study. In this case, interviews were conducted. The results show the need to attend to the social participation of all students already in the stage of Early Childhood Education as a fundamental part of what is understood as an inclusive classroom. Similarly, this study identifies both the factors that hinder and facilitate the response of teachers to this aspect in relation to the students, teachers, and families.

Keywords: social participation; inclusion; teaching methodology



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1. Introduction

Understanding inclusive education as a right and as an international challenge, as is gathered in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for sustainable development in its fourth Goal, requires educational systems, schools, and, ultimately, every professional associated with education to take on the responsibility that corresponds to them within their scope of action. To this end, as was pointed out by the UNESCO [1] in its Global Education Monitoring Report, when guiding our action it is important to set a clear horizon. The present study is based on the definition of inclusion published by the UNESCO [2], which is founded on the propositions of authors such as Ainscow et al. [3]: “a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners” [2] (p. 7). In this framework, we focused on the dimension of participation, specifically on social participation.

Participation is a process that is strongly related to the dimension of learning, which refers to personal well-being and social relationships [4], that is, to the quality of the interpersonal experiences of students [5].

Koster et al. [6] (p. 135) defined the social participation of students in their classrooms as “the presence of positive social contacts/interactions between them and their classmates, their acceptance by their classmates, the social/friendship relationships between them and their classmates, and their perception of being accepted by their classmates”. It is a complex and multi-dimensional construct, in which objective and subjective defining elements are distinguished. The former could be placed in a spectrum from the most nuclear and basic (positive interactions) to the most complex and guaranteeing of social inclusion (e.g.,

friendship relations characterised by reciprocal help or mutual support) [7]. The subjective elements are related to the bidirectional axis of acceptance, which implies, on the one hand, accepting, and, on the other hand, feeling accepted. Similarly, Juvonen et al. [8] used the term social inclusion to indicate these two aspects: social acceptance by the classmates and having “supportive” friends. From this perspective, participation is the way in which all students, regardless of their needs, socially benefit from inclusive education [9]. In fact, there is evidence that shows the benefits of inclusive education for all students [10–13].

In our opinion, “being part of”, that is, “really belonging to” and “feeling as part” of the group of peers will also and fundamentally depend on the opportunities provided by the context to all students (above the social competence they show) [14].

Therefore, a classroom cannot be considered inclusive if the teachers do not take into account and thoroughly plan actions aimed at promoting social relationships in the classroom, peer support, the feeling of belonging and the creation of safe spaces [15–17]. For this to happen, teacher training processes in inclusive approaches are [18,19]. Thus, this study is focused on the interpersonal experiences that take place in classrooms which care for the inclusion of all students.

Moreover, this work is also focused on the analysis of this central dimension of inclusion in a group of students in situations of special vulnerability to exclusion processes, such as those with special educational needs (SEN) and, more specifically, in those specially challenging to teachers: students with ASD [20,21]. In this line, previous studies show that the inclusion of both students with social difficulties and those with behavioural problems generates more challenges than the inclusion of students with other types of SEN [22,23]. Precisely the importance of this dimension in these students has been highlighted by teachers, families, and students themselves, although research has focused more on stages after Early Childhood [24]. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of creating opportunities to interact with peers and how to do so [25]. These studies have also pointed out the relevance of keeping this aspect in mind at school because of the potential benefits for students with ASD [26] and its relation to the avoidance of involuntary isolation and other forms of exclusion and aggression among peers, so the school as a whole and not just classrooms must become safe spaces [8].

Regarding the stage of Early Childhood Education, especially in the first cycle, the perception of both families and teachers toward the social participation of SEN students could be considered “kind” in terms of the relation and interaction with their peers in the classroom [27]. In other words, families focus their attention on the fact that their children are in the classroom, sharing spaces with others and in a safe environment, although they do not contemplate other important components of participation related to the previously mentioned characteristics, obviously, according to their developmental stage. It is later on, especially when they reach the stage of secondary education, when this aspect becomes central in the valuation of the inclusion of their children. Peer relationships, acceptance, and social support become three of the main concerns of parents in this stage [28].

Inclusive preschool environments offer small children with disabilities important opportunities to strengthen socio-emotional skills, as well as the development of language and early literacy [29]. Considering this aspect is one of the most relevant factors in the decisions of parents when schooling their children with SEN in ordinary schools [30].

These first stages are very valuable for the creation of conceptions toward inclusion [31–33]. In fact, Binnur Yıldırım Hacıbrahimoglu [34] found, already in preschool students, less positive attitudes toward their peers with intellectual disabilities with respect to the rest of their peers, stating that sharing the classroom is not enough, and that it is also necessary to promote quality interactions. Thus, the stage of early childhood education seems to constitute a key moment to create positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities, in particular, and toward inclusion, in general.

However, few studies have delved into this dimension of inclusion in these first educational stages. Therefore, the interest of this study is to know whether the construct of social participation is promoted in the stage of Early Childhood in schools committed to

inclusion, that is, those which open their doors to all students without exclusion, including students with ASD.

Consequently, taking into account critical elements of what is understood as social participation, such as the acceptance of students with ASD by their classmates, the existence of social relationships in which peers are support agents, and the importance of opportunities of interaction provided by the context, this study poses the following:

- Is there a predisposition to accept students with ASD on the part of their peers? In this sense, what are their attitudes?
- Are there positive friendship relations and a perception of social support from peers?
- What barriers and facilitators are identified for the social participation of students in these classrooms?

2. Materials and Methods

To respond to the research questions, a *mixed design* study was conducted to explore different aspects of the problem from different sources. In the scope of Education, the number of mixed studies has increased exponentially [35,36]. With this design, the fundamental aim is to triangulate, complement, and attain a more complete approach of this complex phenomenon [37–40]. Specifically, this study followed the *Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods* approach [41–43], simultaneously gathering quantitative and qualitative data that allow responses to the questions of whether classrooms concerned about inclusion take social participation into account. The quantitative data were provided by the students themselves, and they respond to the following questions: Is there peer acceptance of others, including those who are more vulnerable to the processes of exclusion, such as students with ASD? Are there positive friendship relations and a perception of social support from peers? The qualitative data were obtained from a sample constituted by parents and teachers, and they respond to the question: What barriers and facilitators are identified in these classrooms for the social participation of the students? Both types of data generated results that allowed for a more complete view of the dimension of social participation in these classrooms, indicating practices aimed at favouring it.

The process that guided the study is shown in Figure 1.

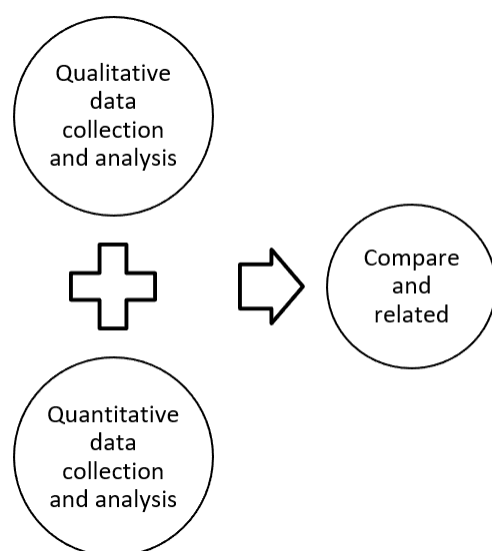


Figure 1. Process followed in the study.

Regarding the scientific guarantees of the study, we followed a triangulation process among data sources (Denzin, 1970 cited in [44]), comparing the data and analyses with comparative potential [45]. The triangulation among researchers [46] was conducted on the qualitative data, periodically comparing the analyses and interpretations performed by the authors of the study.

Furthermore, with respect to the *ethical aspects*, this study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Madrid. The parents and teachers were requested to sign an informed consent in order to protect their rights, stating that participation in the study was voluntary, and that their privacy and confidentiality would be respected and guaranteed at all times. Similarly, the schools had the authorisation of the parents for the participation of their children in the study.

2.1. Quantitative Study

2.1.1. Participants

The sample of the study was constituted by 85 students of the second cycle of Early Childhood Education (5 years of age) from three educational centres: two in the Community of Madrid (41.2% of the sample) and one in the Valencian Community (58.8% of the sample). Regarding sex, 55.3% were boys and 44.7% were girls. With regard to the type of school, 82.4% of the students belonged to public centres and 17.6% belonged to charter schools.

These centres were preferential schools for students with ASD. The participants were selected by convenience sampling [47], with the collaboration of organisations of parents and experts in the scope of autism; the parents facilitated the access to the centres in which their children were registered. In all cases, the students with ASD spent more than 50% of the school day in the regular classroom.

All the students of the sample had classmates with ASD in their group/class.

2.1.2. Instruments

To measure attitudes, we used the *questionnaire of attitudes toward inclusion*. This questionnaire is a translation and adaptation of the version for students of the scale of valuation of attitudes toward inclusion developed by De Boer et al. [48]. It is a self-reported questionnaire consisting of a vignette that describes a hypothetical child with ASD and 14 attitude statements. These statements evaluate two components of attitudes described in the introduction: affective (6 items) and behavioural (4 items). After reading the vignette, the participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the attitude statements based on dichotomous answers (happy face emoticon or YES/sad face emoticon or NO). Once the authors gave their permission, a bilingual person was given the questionnaire to translate it, attending to cultural aspects. A reverse translation was conducted, following the guidelines of Balluerka et al. [49]. Lastly, a reliability analysis was conducted, both for the original questionnaire ($\alpha = 0.875$), indicating very good reliability [50], and for the subscales (affective: $\alpha = 0.762$; behavioural: $\alpha = 0.785$).

We also administered the *questionnaire of friends and social support for students*. This instrument is part of the questionnaire of valuation of subjective well-being for children and young people KIDSCREEN-52 [51,52]. Specifically, it corresponds to the dimension of the questionnaire “friends and social support” translated to Spanish, and it consists of 6 items. The answer format is dichotomous (YES/NO) and, again, the options are accompanied by emoticons (happy face and sad face) to facilitate the response of the sample. Cronbach’s alphas were calculated for the ten KIDSCREEN dimensions, ranging satisfactorily between 0.76 and -0.89 [53].

2.1.3. Procedure

We contacted the educational centres that met the requirements described in the sample, through the management of the centres, explaining to them the objectives of this study and inviting them to participate. Once their participation was confirmed, the consent forms were sent to the parents of the children.

The questionnaires were administered by two researchers in each group/class with the help of the tutors. Before starting, voluntary participation was requested, allowing free play to those who did not agree to participate. The group was divided into subgroups of 3–6 students, who received the support of a researcher or the tutor. The procedure of administration of the questionnaire consisted in reading aloud each item in each subgroup,

in order for each student to respond yes or no individually, ticking the appropriate emoticon. The researchers and tutors explained the items and solved doubts to ensure that the students understood them.

2.1.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software (v25). Descriptive analyses, with frequencies and percentages, were performed with the data obtained from the items of each questionnaire. In this study, inferential analyses were not conducted to study differences between groups, since they served no purpose to respond to the research questions, as there was only one age group, which was constituted by classmates of students with ASD.

With respect to the data related to the attitudes toward inclusion, a cluster analysis was carried out to group individuals with similar profiles, with the aim of determining whether there was a group with clearly negative attitudes.

2.2. Qualitative Study

2.2.1. Participants

The sample was constituted by six families of children with ASD schooled in the stage of Early Childhood Education and the teachers of their respective schools.

As was previously pointed out, for the selection of families, a convenience and criteria purposive sampling was employed [47]. All families had their ASD children schooled in one of the centres in which the students of the previous phase (quantitative study) were registered. Table 1 gathers the characteristics of the participating families.

Table 1. Characteristics of the families.

Name (Initials)	Child's Sex	Child's Age at the Time of the Interviews	Type of Centre
Guille (Gil)	male	2	Charter
Nico (Nic)	male	3	Public
Lara (Lar)	female	3	Charter
Dario (Dar)	male	3	Public
Lena (Len)	female	5	Public
Ares (Are)	male	5	Charter

The names assigned are fictitious, in order to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants.

Moreover, 8 teachers voluntarily agreed to participate. Of these, 1 was a support teacher of the ASD classroom, 1 was a paraprofessional, and 6 were ordinary classroom teachers. Table 2 presents a detailed description of the characteristics of the participating teachers. The names assigned are fictitious, in order to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 2. Characteristics of the participating teachers.

Name of the Student (Initials)	Professional Profile	Type of Centre
Guille (Gil)	Teacher	Charter
Nico (Nic)	Teacher	Public
Lana (La)	Teacher	Charter
Dario (Dar)	Teacher	Public
Lena (Len)	Teacher	Public
Lena (Len)	Paraprofessional	Public
Lena (Len)	Special education teacher	Public
Ares (Are)	Teacher	Charter

2.2.2. Instruments

To gather the information, interviews were conducted with the families and teachers. Questions were developed based on the theoretical dimensions of the study related to the importance of social participation, barriers, and facilitators. We asked questions such as the following: What aspects of the day-to-day activity do you consider that could be facilitators for the development of social participation? What aspects of the day-to-day activity do you consider that could be barriers to the development of social participation?

All the interviewers, for both families and teachers, used the same question guide to perform the interviews [54]. The interviews were recorded and transcribed attending to the established confidentiality criteria.

2.2.3. Procedure

The families that agreed to participate voluntarily in the project were contacted, establishing with them a schedule for the interviews. With respect to the teachers, once the project was presented and their voluntary agreement to participate was obtained, the interviews were planned within school hours. The interviews lasted approximately one hour.

2.2.4. Data Analysis

The information gathered through the interviews was transformed into electronic text information. An inductive thematic analysis was performed [54] including latent or implicit and semantic or explicit content [55]. A theme is understood as something that condensates the meaning or a pattern of part of the information found [54]. The NVivo software was used to carry out the analyses. Table 3 shows the identified themes. The expressions that appear in quotation marks are literal expressions from the interviews, and they condensate the meaning of the themes.

Table 3. Barriers and facilitators/supports for social participation: themes.

Thematic Blocks	Theme
Barriers	Lack of knowledge/lack of competences: “We need to know how to reach the students”.
Facilitators	Support in the face of challenges: “I want to play” Peers as a factor of inclusion: “All children love him/her” The importance of working on the relationships among the students: “They become sensitive” Teachers’ willingness to learn: “I learned a lot” Partnerships with families: “They are really committed to everything” Natural classroom context: “Opportunities”

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Study

(a) Attitudes

Table 4 shows the results in terms of percentages (disregarding the number of unanswered items) of responses that show a positive attitude toward inclusion.

As can be observed, 11 of the 14 items gather a percentage of answers with positive attitude near or above 80%. However, items 9 and 14, which refer to behavioural attitudes aimed at academic or classroom tasks, present a lower percentage of answers of positive attitude (71.8% and 67.5%, respectively). Surprisingly, item 11 presents a much lower percentage of answers of positive attitude (40.5%). This result could be due to the way in which the item is expressed, which leads to doubt its reliability to measure the attitude toward inclusion, since, if a person does not want something to be known and spread, that person will not tell anybody, without exceptions.

Table 4. Positive attitudes toward inclusion.

	Items	Responses N	Responses Positive Attitudes	%
1.	Imagine that other children laugh at Alex, would you defend him?	78	65	83.3%
2.	Imagine that it is your birthday, would you invite Alex?	84	79	94%
3.	Imagine that Alex lives next to you, would you like that?	85	68	80%
4.	Would you be very happy to have Alex as a friend?	85	74	87.1%
5.	Would you try to stay away from Alex? *	81	69	85.2%
6.	Imagine that Alex wants to be your friend, would you love him the same as your other friends?	82	71	86.6%
7.	Imagine that the teacher changes your places in the classroom, would you like to sit near Alex?	83	68	81.9%
8.	Imagine that Alex invites you to his home, would you like that a lot?	83	76	91.6%
9.	Imagine that you have to do an assignment with Alex, would you be comfortable?	78	56	71.8%
10.	Imagine that your mother or father tells you to invite a friend to come to your home, would you invite Alex?	82	72	87.8%
11.	Imagine that something happens and you don't want everyone to know, would you tell Alex about it?	84	34	40.5%
12.	Imagine that you are in recess, would you like to play with Alex?	83	66	79.5%
13.	Would you like to play with Alex in his home?	84	72	85.7%
14.	Imagine that you don't have recess because you stay in the classroom with Alex, would you do it?	83	56	67.5%

* The frequency and percentage of NO answers are considered in this item.

The items with fewer negative responses are related to inviting or being invited to participate in activities outside the school (items 2 and 8). The number of responses of negative attitude ranges between 7 and 17 in most items, with 11 and 12 being the most repeated frequencies. There were more than 20 answers in items 9, 11 and 14 (22, 50 and 27 responses of negative attitude, respectively).

These results suggest that there could be a group of students with a clear tendency to respond with a negative attitude throughout the questionnaire, or the individuals who present negative attitudes differ between items. The cluster analysis reveals a distribution or grouping of the sample into two groups, as can be observed in Figure 2. For this analysis, it makes sense to use fully completed questionnaires, which leads us to discard 15 that have one or more unanswered items.

Table 5 presents the average link between these two groups in each item.

Table 5. Grouping of individuals of the sample in each item based on their answer. Number of answers and percentages of students of each group.

ITEMS	Group 1		Group 2	
	NO (N/%)	YES (N/%)	NO (N/%)	YES (N/%)
1. Imagine that other children laugh at Alex, would you defend him?	8 (13.3%)	52 (86.7%)	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
2. Imagine that it is your birthday, would you invite Alex?	2 (3.3%)	58 (96.7%)	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
3. Imagine that Alex lives next to you, would you like that?	9 (15%)	51 (85%)	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
4. Would you be very happy to have Alex as a friend?	4 (6.7%)	56 (93.3%)	6 (60%)	4 (40%)
5. Would you try to stay away from Alex? *	58 (96.7%)	2 (3.3%)	3 (30%)	7 (70%)
6. Imagine that Alex wants to be your friend, would you love him the same as your other friends?	4 (6.7%)	56 (93.3%)	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
7. Imagine that the teacher changes your places in the classroom, would you like to sit near Alex?	3 (5%)	57 (95%)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
8. Imagine that Alex invites you to his home, would you like that a lot?	1 (1.7%)	59 (98.3%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)
9. Imagine that you have to do an assignment with Alex, would you be comfortable?	9 (15%)	51 (85%)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
10. Imagine that your mother or father tells you to invite a friend to come to your home, would you invite Alex?	3 (5%)	57 (95%)	6 (60%)	4 (40%)

Table 5. Cont.

ITEMS	Group 1		Group 2	
	NO (N/%)	YES (N/%)	NO (N/%)	YES (N/%)
11. Imagine that something happens and you don't want everyone to know, would you tell Alex about it?	31 (51.7%)	29 (48.3%)	10 (100%)	0 (0%)
12. Imagine that you are in recess, would you like to play with Alex?	5 (8.3%)	55 (91.7%)	8 (80%)	2 (20%)
13. Would you like to play with Alex in his home?	3 (5%)	57 (95%)	7 (70%)	3 (30%)
14. Imagine that you don't have recess because you stay in the classroom with Alex, would you do it?	16 (26.7%)	44 (73.3%)	9 (90%)	1 (10%)
TOTAL	60 (100%)		10 (100%)	

* Reverse item.

As is shown in the previous table, Group 2 consisted of 10 students who consistently answered with a negative attitude toward the inclusion of a peer with SEN, specifically ASD.

(b) Friends and social support

Regarding the presence of positive relations that favour mutual support, Table 6 presents the percentage of positive responses in each item of the Friends and Social Support Questionnaire.

Table 6. Friends and social support. Percentages of positive responses (distribution by item).

Items	N	%
1. Do you spend time with your friends?	79	92.9%
2. Do you do things with other children?	65	76.5%
3. Do you have fun with your friends?	82	96.5%
4. Do you and your friends help each other?	78	91.8%
5. Can you talk to your friends about anything?	68	80%
6. Can you trust your friends (tell them secrets)?	58	68.2%

3.2. Qualitative Study

Next, we show the results in relation to two large thematic blocks: the barriers and facilitators for the social participation of students in the classrooms. The quotes include the role of the interviewee and the initials of the name of the child.

(a) Barriers

Lack of knowledge/lack of competences: "We need to know how to reach the students"

The theme of lack of knowledge or lack of competences by the teachers to accompany the students with ASD was identified as one of the main barriers they encounter. The teachers admit that this barrier is especially related to the communication capacity of ASD students. The interviewees identified the lack of language in the students and the lack of knowledge on how to accompany children in this situation as a barrier to the participation of the students. However, the support teachers stated that they had tools that facilitate the establishment of positive relations in the classroom.

At that moment, she wanted to express and do all those things; it was a great barrier [not having a language].

With us it is easier [communicating] than with the rest of the children and the other teachers, because we have a wide range of possibilities: we can do it with signs, routines, pictograms; well-established routines in the ASD classroom, thus for us it is less of a barrier for the classroom. (Paraprofessional, Len)

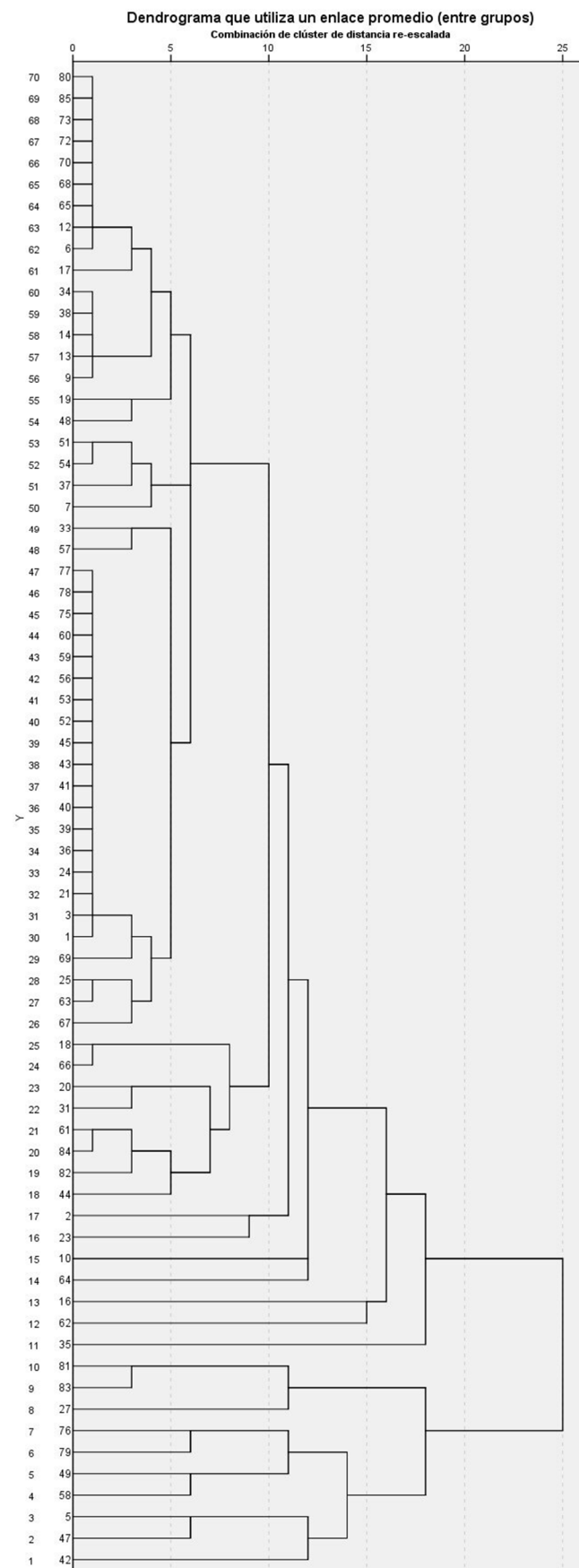


Figure 2. Cluster analysis by participants.

The families themselves also commented on the challenge that the lack of language of their children can pose for social participation in the classrooms.

When he started at the age of 3 years, he could not talk; he came from being in his classroom with his classmates, but he could not talk. Therefore, in the barrier of language, with his tutor of the reference classroom he was a stopper, it was a great barrier . . . In all the verbal activities, he quickly disconnected and lost all interest... (Mother, Len)

(b) Facilitators/Support

Support in the face of challenges: "I want to play"

Support in the face of challenging situations was also an important theme. This search for support is performed by both students and teachers. The teachers stated that this is a relevant focus of attention and work that should be carried out in the classroom. The following quote shows how an ASD child learned to ask for help to play and how the teacher tried to respond to the situation:

I see that the child wants to play and did not try hard enough. She goes near the other kids, waiting, but there was no chance. Then, she comes to us and tells us "I want to play". "Len, why did you pull her hair?", "they don't let me play", but the reason for this is that she may still not know how to express that she wants to play. (Special education teacher, Len)

Support, specifically among teachers, in the face of challenges was also considered an important aspect. This support is considered valuable when it comes from the specialist teacher and other teachers. The following quote shows the value of the support from the specialist teacher for the regular teachers.

Thus, in the end, I need someone who guides me, some specialist that says "look, he is in instrumental mode, and that cannot be, you must guide him, you have to take his hand and lead him", "these activities are great for him..." And then I say things like "look, he loves this, and he hates this..." In the end I have to try. If someone tells me "do this, don't do that", we may advance more. (Teacher, Are)

Peers as a factor of inclusion: "All the kids love him/her"

The families recognised the power of these contexts of interaction among peers in the development of their children.

With respect to the children, the other mothers tell me, "your child has changed a lot, and all the kids love him". He certainly is very affectionate, so he obviously has friends and the friendship of his classmates". (Mother, Are)

The importance of working on the relationships among the students: "They become sensitive"

In relation to the above mentioned, a frequent theme was related to the explicit instruction of support behaviour among students. This theme gathers the importance attributed to the fact that the students learn to be responsible for their peers:

They take great care of him. In fact, if they see that he gets a little nervous, they know, and they give him a ball or something round, so that he can make it spin. If he pulls their hair, they say "ouch! AG, no", and that's it; if someone else pulls their hair, they get angry, but not when AG does it. They take great care of him. If he needs something, they help him. For instance, if AG wants the tap open and splashes some water out, they tell him "no, that's bad" and they help him to open and close the tap... They help AG a lot. (Teacher, Are).

Teachers' willingness to learn: "I learned a lot"

The teachers' willingness to learn was also identified as an important theme for the promotion of spaces of positive relations among peers and, particularly, the participation of the ASD students. This resulted in an improvement of the teaching and learning process

for all students, in the development of both social skills and other competences. That is, the adjustments and changes introduced aimed at the students with ASD were regarded as positive for all students.

It was great for everyone. In fact, it was like a game: we went to have lunch, and if the image was not there, they stood up and placed the image in its place, and that was useful for everyone. It was a bit difficult for me, since I could not follow the entire schedule, although I could include other things that were not planned and which were useful for everyone. (Teacher, Nic)

Partnerships with families: "They are really committed to everything"

The involvement of the families in the educational process is a key theme. Some teachers pointed out the importance of this collaboration being fostered both by the families themselves and by the school, in order to enable joint actions and participation in the daily activity of the classroom. As was pointed out by a teacher:

Her father also loves hearing things like "look, this week she did this", because he is not present in the daily activity of the classroom. Here in the school, when they come to bring and pick them up, they enter the classroom, leave the backpack, ask questions, we talk... All that improves our communication... (Teacher, Lar)

Natural context: "Opportunities"

The classroom as a natural context of social learning was a cross-sectional theme in all interviews. The families especially highlighted that it was important that their children were in the classrooms, due to the opportunities provided:

We are happy with his advance in many aspects. He opened much more to the other children. The teachers showed us videos of him playing with other children in the yard; he looks very happy . . . I want Nico to learn the routines, to integrate, to sit down in meetings, to listen to others . . . And he is doing those things . . . He may not participate in the meeting, because he can't talk, but he listens, sees what others do, and then he tries to transmit that at home. (Mother, Nic)

4. Discussion

The results obtained have allowed us to know the predisposition of students towards their peers with ASD as well as some highly relevant conditions that may facilitate their social participation in classrooms committed to inclusion. The attitudes toward inclusion shown by the students were positive, according to the results of the quantitative study. Only in item 11 is the percentage of positive attitude responses below 50%.

However, the behavioural attitudes toward academic or classroom tasks were less positive. This finding is in line with the previous results obtained by Mirete et al. [56] with school children aged 3–6 years, who showed a general positive attitude toward diversity, although they considered that the academic capacity of their classmates with disabilities was a limitation for their classroom tasks and activities. These results point to that, already in the second cycle of Early Childhood Education, the students perceive differences among them in the academic scope. These findings pose an important warning to educators about the impact of their actions and messages in the classroom. They evidence the need to avoid focusing the attention on the disabilities of the students and rather underline the common characteristics shared by all students [57]. Likewise, the results indicate the importance of incorporating, as a relevant part of the teaching methodology, the attention and action on this dimension of participation, ensuring not only that they are in the classroom, but also that they are happy and well.

The importance of attending to this aspect is further reinforced by the results provided by the cluster analysis, as they identify a group of students (10 children out of 85) who repeatedly gave responses of negative attitude toward inclusion throughout the questionnaire. This would mean that, already at the young age of 4–5 years, coinciding with the end of the stage of early childhood, there are already students who are less willing to accept

inclusion. This should be viewed with caution as there may be different factors involved such as developmental factors.

Although the results related to the existence of friendship relations and social support indicate that these students mostly perceive that they have friends who help each other, with whom they spend time and have fun, this finding indicates the need to intervene educationally in order to modify the attitudes and create new knowledge based on equality of difference [56]. In fact, it would be the appropriate time to make use of the general good will of mutual support in this stage, to ensure that the academic world does not begin to separate them. This would reinforce the assertion that a classroom cannot be inclusive if it does not consider this aspect [15–17].

Among the main results obtained from the qualitative approach, the potentiation of support behaviour among peers was found to be a facilitator of the social participation of the students. The teachers and families attributed importance to this theme, perhaps without the certainty that the classroom environment may deteriorate, although with the idea of the need for support and prevention. This result is in line with those found in other studies, which emphasise that the classmates of children with disabilities should have a reference or guide to support their peers. Peer support requires the adult to model appropriate interactions to ensure the active participation of the child in all the classroom routines and activities [16].

Several studies have attributed to the teachers a fundamental role in the construction of the peer support network [58–60]. This implies educating the classmates [61] and, specifically, a good teaching action to ensure that the classmates of children with autism learn to recognise the specific needs of the latter and to coexist with naturalness [27]. Juvonen et al. [8] proposed a model of proactive inclusion to maximise contact between groups and intentionally facilitate positive interactions and relations among classmates. The aim is to incorporate cooperative learning and generate opportunities to ensure that the different students get to know each other better and have positive interactions, thus fostering social inclusion. In fact, peer support in any of its classroom manifestations or organisations is strategic in any pedagogy that is considered inclusive [15]. In this sense, teachers can structure their classroom, for instance, from collaborative learning strategies, to foster the social participation of the children [62].

The families also considered the classroom as a natural space for the learning of social participation. In this sense, the literature shows that children with disabilities can be taught when systematic teaching strategies are embedded into ongoing classroom activities and routines [63,64], also highlighting that extracurricular activities can be a fundamental context [65]. In fact, as was stated by Porter [66], the classmates themselves are key agents in the development and education of all students, especially for those who are in situations of special risk of exclusion.

The evidence shows that involving others in delivering systematic teaching is possible and advisable. Families, paraprofessionals, and peers can implement strategies as reliably as teachers with special education experience, as long as they have the support for that [67–70].

In this framework, it is also important to consider that, as was shown in previous studies [48], the attitudes of the classmates are related to those of the families; therefore, when creating positive attitudes toward inclusion, in addition to acting in the classroom, it is also essential to act beyond the classroom, e.g., with all the families.

Moreover, the results of our study show that the collaboration between teachers and families is fundamental. Several authors highlight the importance of including the family in early childhood programmes, playing an active role [71–73] and sharing information about the day-to-day life [74,75].

Similarly, and in the line of previous studies [76], collaboration and support among teachers is identified as a factor of great relevance to reach all students in general and promoting their social participation, especially in those considered vulnerable to exclusion. This aspect can also reduce the impact of one of the main barriers found: the feeling of a

lack of knowledge to promote the social participation of ASD students. Several studies have identified that the erroneous conceptions of teachers toward students with ASD are linked to the lack of knowledge on how to communicate with them and understand their behaviour [77–79]. The inclusion of students with social difficulties and behavioural problems generates great challenges [22,23], and the support among teachers in designing classes or materials, mutual observation, co-teaching, sharing experiences, etc. is identified as a fundamental strategy to develop inclusive contexts [73,80,81].

Moreover, as is recognised by the teachers themselves, and in line with other authors, having ASD students in the classroom is an opportunity to improve their teaching, ultimately benefiting all the students in the classroom [12].

Therefore, the fact that this stage in general is “more relaxed” in terms of social participation does not imply that it should be disregarded. A long-term, preventive, and interventional view is required, considering the evolution of the process. This is contemplated by Tan and Perren [25], who suggested both preventive and interventional strategies from five different levels: cooperation with different community stakeholders; classroom environment; curriculum plan; activity design; and children with SEN.

5. Conclusions

From the first years of schooling, and depending on the social and emotional development, the promotion of the social participation of all students must be a constant in Early Childhood Education, especially in its second cycle. It is an ideal moment to work from a preventive approach on the rejection and exclusion of the other, with the aim of consolidating the inclusive classrooms, with a good teaching action and the collaboration of the families.

With respect to the teachers of this stage, those who consider that the socioemotional skills and motivation are more important than knowing how to read [82] must be a reference or guide to the classmates of children with disabilities, to ensure that they interact with them and provide their support [16], adopting a proactive approach to offer opportunities of positive contact and relations among peers, incorporating, for instance, cooperative learning [8].

In regard to the families, their collaboration is important [71,72]. Aligned with the teachers, it is necessary that they promote the socioemotional development of their children to guarantee their success in school and in life [16]. The school can contribute to empowering the families, helping them to become aware of the importance of also generating opportunities of interaction with peers beyond the school.

To sum up, placing the focus of attention on the promotion of social participation in the classroom implies a systemic work with the students, the teachers, and also with all the families, since each of these groups can become a barrier or facilitator of inclusion.

However, this study has some limitations that must be considered when interpreting the information. It would be advisable to delve into what happens in the classroom through observation, as well as by listening to the voices of the students of early childhood education, in order to better understand the origin of the less positive attitudes and develop strategies that improve the participation of every student in the classroom. It would be advisable to delve into what happens in the classroom through observation. Therefore, as a continuation of the study presented, in future research it would be of great relevance to complement the information gathered through observations in the different spaces of peer interaction at school. In addition, consideration should be given to listening to the voices of the students in early childhood education, in order to better understand the origin of the less positive attitudes and develop strategies that improve the participation of every student in the classroom.

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