

Teachers of learners with ASD in mainstream schools and classrooms in Spain: attitudes towards inclusive education

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This study analyses the attitudes of teachers in Spain towards the inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream education settings and their relationship with the perceived benefits of inclusion. The ex post facto prospective design included 180 teachers from 14 schools. Data were collected using a questionnaire on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and a second questionnaire on the benefits of inclusion developed for the specific purposes of this study. The results show teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion as well as the benefits perceived. This study demonstrates the fundamental role of teachers' previous experience. Implications for inclusive cultures and practices in schools are discussed.

Key words: attitudes, autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education, teaching practices

Introduction

Inclusive education and learners with autism spectrum disorder

Inclusive education is recognized as a global challenge, as well as a basis for improving the quality of life of all people and achieving sustainable development. In the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

(UN, 2015), Goal 4 states: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. However, ensuring that inclusive education can be provided for all learners – children and adults, without exception – requires profound changes in education systems. Analyses conducted to assess the advancement of this objective have revealed a concerning situation regarding the most vulnerable groups, such as learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 2018).

The benefits of inclusive education have been examined in various studies. For example, a review carried out by Kefallinou et al. (2020) concluded that inclusive education promotes quality education as well as social inclusion. Similarly, this time focusing on students with autism, Oliver-Kerrigan and Christy (2021) report an improvement in verbal communication, adaptive behavior and social competence, as well as game skills, in these students. Likewise, the benefits for the classmates of students with autism are highlighted, indicating that there is an improvement in socio-emotional skills and a better perception of disability.

Legislative advancements are not always accompanied by inclusive educational practices or even, in many cases, an effective inclusion plan, with the latter being understood as the presence, participation and achievement of learners with special educational needs in mainstream schools and classrooms (IBE-UNESCO, 2016). Committing to the values and principles of inclusive education requires changing and enhancing the processes and systems of educational practice. The goal, as stated by Porter (2011, p. 19), is to ensure that each child:

‘goes to the same school as their brothers and sisters, being provided with access to the same learning opportunities as other children, and being engaged in both the academic and social activities of the classroom’.

Learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are commonly viewed as more challenging for the provision of effective inclusive education than learners with other special educational needs (Humphrey & Symes, 2013); however, children and young people with ASD are increasingly participating in inclusive education settings (Cassimos et al., 2015; Lindsay et al., 2013; Soto Chodiman et al., 2012).

Currently, in Spain, learners with ASD can receive three different types of schooling. First, they can go to mainstream schools (either schools with some type of specialized assistance, or simply regular mainstream schools), where these learners can attend the mainstream classroom at all times or use the mainstream classroom in combination with ASD classrooms (which go by different names depending on the Autonomous Community in which they are located). Second, they can choose combined schooling (in a special school and a mainstream school). The third option is full-time education in a special school (Tomás & Grau, 2016).

Considering this, the present study is focused on mainstream schools with learners with ASD. All the schools that participated in this study had an ASD classroom as the main resource to attend to the needs of these learners, who nevertheless spent over 60% of their time in the mainstream classroom.

Policies to support inclusion in Europe

In Europe, in recent years, there have been significant legislative advancements in the inclusive education of children with special educational needs, as shown by recent reports from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2019).

A study conducted in 25 European countries (EASNIE, 2018) looking at indicators of key policy issues for inclusive education, such as access to mainstream education, access to inclusive education and placement of learners officially identified as having special educational needs, between the years 2014 and 2016, concluded that none of the participating countries had 100% enrolment in inclusive settings. All countries use some form of fully separate specialist provision (separate schools and units), as well as separate classes in mainstream schools, which is strongly associated with the 'input funding model' described by Meijer and Watkins (2019). Across all countries, including Spain, for some learners – particularly those with complex and severe special needs and/or disabilities – separate specialist provision is still the educational placement that ensures their right to education, albeit not an inclusive education (EASNIE, 2018).

Positive teacher attitudes as a promoter of inclusive opportunities for students

Several studies show that the attitudes of teachers, parents and classmates towards inclusive education are neutral or negative (Cassimos et al., 2015; De Boer et al., 2012a), with significant differences in terms of the type of

educational need or level of need. Moreover, the educational stage seems to be another factor that influences the attitudes of teachers. Thus, primary school teachers were found to have more positive attitudes than middle or high school teachers (Park & Chitiyo, 2011). These data are in line with those generally found by research on the subject of inclusive education, which show that the stage of secondary education poses, in many cases, a barrier to the inclusion of learners with disabilities (Echeita et al., 2009).

These attitudes are especially negative towards learners with cognitive disabilities or moderate and severe behavioral problems (De Boer et al., 2012b). Jury et al. (2021) conclude that the inclusion of students with potential behavioral or learning difficulties, especially students with ASD, is seen as problematic. The degree of severity and the presence of associated difficulties seem to play a relevant role. Thus, one of the issues in the process of including learners with ASD is the severity of the disability (Cassimos et al., 2015). According to Eldar et al. (2010), the factors that can make or break the inclusion process are language skills, stereotypical behavior and other individual abilities. When dealing with learners who have been diagnosed with ASD, some of the overt difficulties that teachers and educational assistants/teacher aides are expected to deal with include poor social and/or communication skills, exemplified by developmental delays and a restrictive use of language. Moreover, learners with ASD often manifest challenging stereotypic behaviors such as hand flapping and twisting. In addition, learners with ASD often fail to develop age-appropriate peer relationships, manifest a need for rigid routine and have varying levels of intellectual disability and/or other difficulties (Soto Chodiman et al., 2012).

In this study, like previous authors who have studied attitudes in relation to students with disabilities (De Boer & Munke, 2014), we follow the proposal of Triandis (1971) who understands attitudes as 'learned predisposition reflecting how favorable or unfavorable people are towards other people, objects or events'. According to this framework, attitudes are considered to have three components: cognitive (knowledge and opinions about the causes of behavior, in this case of children with disabilities); affective (related to the understanding of disability, which may lead to agreeing or refusing to work or share situations with a person with a disability); and behavioral (the tendency of an individual to respond in a certain way to a situation involving people with disabilities).

Although some authors have found mostly positive attitudes in teachers towards the inclusion of these learners (Park & Chitiyo, 2011), they also recognize that it is necessary to act on different factors that are limiting their genuine inclusion. Some of the most important challenges for teachers working with learners with autism in inclusive classrooms are: inadequate knowledge of, and training in, using evidence-based intervention methods (Cassimos et al., 2015; Ravet, 2018; Brock et al., 2020); lack of access to consultation support and advice (Cappe et al., 2017); co-ordination of support and services (Finke et al., 2009); and lack of collaboration with other teachers and parents (Cappe et al., 2017). In fact, some studies show that perceived stress and social support predict burnout among teachers of learners with ASD (Cappe et al., 2017). For example, in a study in Ontario, Canada, although the Ministry of Education identified the inclusion of students with ASD in school settings as a priority area for action, it was concluded that the challenges in including children with ASD are understanding and managing behavior, socio-structural barriers and creating an inclusive environment (Lindsay et al., 2013).

Studies focused on learners with ASD show the central role of attitudes in the behavior of teachers, which ultimately influences the success of inclusion (Finke et al., 2009). In this study the participants recognized that the effective inclusion of these learners occurred when they accepted that there will always be room for improvement, but that teachers' attitude was the salient feature that defined their experience. Factors such as training, support needs and curriculum pressure can be linked to this situation. Promotion of learning opportunities for teachers is a key element in the development of inclusive education. As Somma and Bennet (2020) point out, the opportunity to see and practice inclusion, whereby students with disabilities experience success, enables educators to discover the challenges and successes of having a student with disabilities in an inclusive classroom.

Among the factors associated with positive or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of these learners, it is worth highlighting some of those related to teachers themselves, learners and the school context. Regarding teachers, previous training seems to be a factor of great importance. Teachers with previous relevant education and training in autism are seen to have significantly different views, attitudes and expectations of educating learners with ASD, in contrast to teachers without previous relevant education on autism (Cassimos et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the impact of negative attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with ASD on the behavior of teachers is associated with teacher

stress (Kelly & Barnes-Holmes, 2013). However, although some studies examine teacher stress in general, and learners with ASD in particular, it should be noted that stress is not always found among teachers in this context; in fact, some teachers perceive teaching learners with ASD as an opportunity to improve their competencies, and this is influenced by individual factors, such as training, and other factors related to the school context (Cappe et al., 2017).

Regarding students with ASD, various studies confirm that peer support, as a means of collaboration between students, has positive effects on their academic and social learning (Carter et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2015). This is related to the teacher's knowledge of their pupils and the establishment of trusting relationships, as learners with ASD point out in a study by Hummerstone and Parsons (2021). Therefore, identifying factors that can have a positive impact on teachers' attitudes will be of great value not only in improving teaching practices to be consistent with the right to inclusive education for all students, but also in improving teachers' well-being.

The goal of our study is to delve into the attitudes of teachers towards the inclusion of learners with ASD and examine the impact of these attitudes on their general perceptions of inclusive education. Given the relevance of such attitudes and their impact on teaching practices, and considering the small number of studies focused on this subject with specific regard to learners with ASD (Cassimos et al., 2015; Macdonald et al., 2017), it is necessary to carry out more studies in this area, with the aim of defining the factors that influence these attitudes, related both to the teachers themselves and to the context.

In particular, the purpose of the study is to address the impact of teachers' attitudes on their general perception of inclusive education and specifically for students with ASD. The questions addressed by the study are:

1. What are the attitudes of teachers of learners with ASD towards the inclusion of the latter?
2. What is the influence of the experience of teachers of learners with ASD on the attitude of the teachers?
3. What are teachers' opinions of the benefits of inclusive education (for all learners, teachers, parents and the school, in general)?
4. What is the relationship between the attitudes of these teachers towards the inclusion of learners with ASD and their opinions of the benefits of inclusion?

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of a total of 180 teachers from 14 mainstream schools with an ASD classroom. Teachers from these schools were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. All of them teach in schools in which pupils with ASD are enrolled and for whom they may be their teachers at some point during their schooling. All these schools had an ASD classroom as the main resource to attend to the needs of these learners, who nevertheless spent over 60% of their time in the mainstream classroom. Of these schools, 50% were public and the other 50% were charter schools.

Instruments

To respond to the objectives of the study, the following questionnaires were used: the Questionnaire on the Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusive Education, translated and adapted from De Boer et al. (2012a), and a questionnaire designed ad hoc called the Questionnaire on Perceptions of the Benefits of Inclusive Education. We now look at each of these in turn.

According to studies, attitudes are considered to have three components: cognitive; affective and behavioral (Triandis, 1971). The Questionnaire on the Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusive Education assesses these three components of attitudes using 20 items on a four-point Likert scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'): cognition, which assesses beliefs and knowledge about the benefits of inclusion; affection, which refers to teachers' feelings about inclusion, such as competence, confidence, frustration and irritation regarding their teaching performance with learners with ASD/special educational needs; and behavior, which reflects teachers' willingness to implement educational change with the aim of ensuring that their teaching reaches all learners, particularly those with ASD/special educational needs. To obtain the translated and adapted version of this questionnaire, once the authors gave their permission, it was translated by a bilingual person, who paid attention to the cultural aspects as well. Then, a reverse translation was conducted, following the guidelines of Balluerka et al. (2007).

The Questionnaire on Perceptions of the Benefits of Inclusive Education was designed ad hoc for the purposes of this study by the research team. It consists of 16 items that evaluate two areas: benefits and losses for the classmates of learners with ASD/special educational needs, and for the teachers and the school. This questionnaire is completed by indicating the level of agreement

with the statements presented in the items based on a Likert scale with four options (1 = completely disagree, to 4 = completely agree). The objective of this scale is not to obtain general benefit–harm measures, but to analyze which aspects of inclusion are perceived as beneficial, or detrimental; for this reason, no factors have been calculated in this scale. However, to ensure consistency, it was validated by a group of experts (researchers in areas related to inclusive education and teachers), who were asked to assess the appropriateness, relevance and clarity of each item, following the guidelines of Carretero-Dios and Pérez (2013). As a result of this process, two items were removed from the questionnaire; this decision was based on the exclusion criterion of obtaining a score of two points, or lower, in relevance or appropriateness.

Design and variables

This study was conducted following an ex post facto prospective design (Montero & León, 2007). The analyzed variables were attitudes of teachers towards the inclusion of learners with ASD and their opinions of the benefits of inclusive education. The independent variable was teaching experience in working with learners with ASD.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the university (CEI-88-1654).

Procedure

Contact with the schools was made through the headteachers. The schools were selected through the mediation of two organizations of people with ASD and had to meet the following criteria: (a) to be a mainstream school with an ASD classroom; where (b) students spend more than 50% of their day in the mainstream classroom.

In the first contact, the objectives were explained to the headteachers and they were invited to participate. Once the study was approved for each school, paper questionnaires were sent to the headteachers, and school management distributed them to all teachers in the school. The questionnaires included information about the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the information gathered.

A period of four weeks was given to complete the questionnaire. After that time, the questionnaire was collected in person by members of the research team. The response rate was between 50% and 60% of teachers.

Data analysis

For analysis of the results, the statistical software SPSS was used (v25.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA). First, it should be noted that missing data were less than 5%. For the descriptive results, absolute and relative frequencies (percentages) were calculated for the categorical variables, and means and standard deviations were calculated for the quantitative variables.

Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were carried out, following which we decided to use non-parametric test. For both questionnaires, the Mann–Whitney U-test was used to analyze the differences between teachers with and without experience of teaching learners with ASD.

Spearman's rho correlations were used to analyze the relationship between the attitudes of teachers and the perceived benefits of inclusion.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

The 180 participants taught at different levels of education: early childhood (22.9%), primary education (19.6%), secondary education (52.9%), baccalaureate (32%) and vocational training (10.5%). The majority of the sample (79.8%) were women. Regarding age, 20.6% were between 25 and 35 years old, 32.8% were between 36 and 45 years old, 29.4% were between 46 and 55 years old, and 11.7% were over 56 years old (5.5% did not respond). Most of the participants (35%) had between six and 15 years of teaching experience, followed by those with between 16 and 25 years of teaching experience (26.7%); 15% had experience equal to or less than five years; and 18.9% had experience of more than 25 years (4.4% of the sample did not report their years of experience).

Regarding their experience with learners with special educational needs in the classroom, 70% of the teachers had experience compared to 17.4% who did not (12.6% did not report their experience with these learners). Regarding their experience with learners with ASD, 75% of the teachers did have experience, compared to 21.7% who lacked experience (3.3% did not respond).

Attitudes towards inclusion

The scores, both on the general scale and on the subscales, are measured with a minimum of one point and a maximum of four points. The mean score of the attitude scale (3.34) indicates a very positive attitude towards the

inclusion of learners with ASD. The scores obtained on the three subscales are also very positive: 3.37 on the cognitive subscale, 3.19 on the affective subscale and, in particular, 3.48 on the behavior subscale.

To determine whether there were differences in attitude between the participants based on their experience with learners with ASD, the Mann–Whitney U-test was applied, considering experience (yes or no) with ASD learners as the independent variable and the score on the attitude scale and on the subscales as dependent variables (Table 1).

The results show significant differences in attitude between teachers with and without experience of working with learners with ASD ($U = 2005.0$, $p = 0.024$); the teachers who had experience with learners with ASD obtained scores that corresponded to a more positive attitude compared to those without experience of working with learners with ASD.

Perceptions of the benefits of inclusion

In the case of perceptions of the benefits of inclusion, as indicated in the ‘Methods’ section, we used an ad hoc questionnaire so it is not possible to calculate a total scale score or subscales. From a descriptive viewpoint, the mean scores for each item range from 2.47 to 4.57, with 13 of the 16 items above 4. In general, it can be considered that participants believed that inclusion is beneficial for students, their peers, their own professional practice and the school as a whole.

To analyze the influence of the experience of the teachers with learners with ASD on their perceptions of inclusion, the Mann–Whitney U-test was

Table 1: Differences in attitude based on participants’ teaching experience with learners with ASD

	Teaching experience with learners with ASD		Mann–Whitney U	p
	No (n = 39)	Yes (n = 135)		
	Mean rank	Mean rank		
Cognition subscale	73.19	91.93	2074.5	0.042
Affection subscale	70.19	92.50	1957.5	0.014
Behavior subscale	76.40	90.71	2199.5	0.114
Total attitude score	71.42	91.14	2005.5	0.24

applied, considering each item as a dependent variable and experience (yes or no) with learners with ASD as the independent variable (Table 2).

The teachers who had experience of working with learners with ASD perceived greater benefits of inclusion compared to the teachers who did not have such experience. Furthermore, statistically significant differences were found in their perceptions of the belief that the learning of students without specific needs is compromised because teachers need more time to attend to the learners with such needs; in this sense, the participants with experience of working with learners with ASD disagreed more with this statement than those without such experience (item 4, $U = 2106.5$, $p = 0.048$). For the rest of the items, the differences between teachers with and without experience with learners with ASD were not significant.

Relationship between teachers' attitudes and their perceptions of the benefits of inclusion

To analyze the relationship between teachers' attitudes and their perceptions of the benefits of inclusion in the entire sample, Spearman's rho correlations were performed to correlate the total scores of the attitude questionnaire and the subscales with the items on the benefits of inclusion and the total score of the sample (Table 3).

The scores of the items on the attitude questionnaire and the three subscales were significantly correlated with all the items of the questionnaire on the benefits of inclusion, except for item 14; that is, a more positive attitude is not related to the idea that the work of teachers is more demanding in inclusive schools.

Regarding the rest of the items, results show that a more positive attitude is significantly related to a greater perception of the benefits of inclusion. Items 4, 6, 9, 11 and 16 show a significant reverse relationship between attitude and perception of the detriments of inclusion, which indicates that a more positive teacher attitude is related to the perception of fewer detriments; in these cases, the values of the correlations are within the previously mentioned ranges, with these relationships being significant in all cases, both with the general attitude scale and with the subscales.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze the attitudes towards inclusion of teachers in mainstream schools with learners with ASD, and their perceptions of the benefits of the inclusion of these learners, as well as the

Table 2: Differences in perceptions of the benefits of inclusion based on participants' teaching experience with learners with ASD

	Teaching experience with ASD			
	No (n = 39)	Yes (n = 135)	Mann-Whitney U	p
	Mean rank	Mean rank		
1. Learning in inclusive schools prepares all children (with and without SEN) for the real world in a better way	72.63	91.80	2052.5	0.020
2. In inclusive schools, children have a greater responsibility to respect and value human differences	74.94	91.13	2142.5	0.035
3. In inclusive schools, learners with SEN have more opportunities to develop their academic competencies	77.14	90.49	2228.5	0.122
4. In inclusive schools, the learning of children without SEN is compromised because the teacher needs more time to attend to the learners who do have such needs	100.99	83.60	2106.5	0.048
5. In inclusive schools, learners with SEN have more opportunities to nurture their personal and social development	84.15	88.47	2502.0	0.606
6. In inclusive schools, children with SEN will be socially isolated from their classmates	84.21	88.45	2504.0	0.620
7. Inclusive schools are better prepared to respond to the needs of all learners, regardless of their condition	89.71	86.86	2546.5	0.742
8. In the classrooms that have learners with SEN, the teachers must make changes in their teaching practice to benefit all learners	72.22	91.91	2036.5	0.020
9. In inclusive schools, teachers are less satisfied with their work than in non-inclusive schools	89.13	87.03	2569.0	0.810

(Continues)

Table 2: (Continued)

	Teaching experience with ASD			
	No (n = 39)		Yes (n = 135)	
	Mean rank		Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U p
10. Having students with SEN helps teachers to reflect on their practices and consider improving them to ensure that all the children can learn	87.71		87.44	2624.5 0.975
11. In inclusive schools, the teachers tend to work in a way that they are more isolated from their colleagues	90.38		86.67	2520.0 0.658
12. Working with learners who have specific educational support needs encourages teachers to train and work collaboratively with others	86.72		87.73	2602.0 0.906
13. Inclusive schools have more reasons to feel proud for implementing values linked to equity	83.32		88.71	2469.5 0.527
14. In inclusive schools, the work of the teachers is more demanding and tiring	76.82		90.59	2216.0 0.122
15. In inclusive schools, the relationships with the parents are more collaborative	84.45		88.38	2513.5 0.656
16. In inclusive schools, the parents are viewed as a problem rather than support for the classroom and the school	89.46		86.93	2556.0 0.768

Note: SEN: special educational needs.

Table 3: Spearman's rho correlations between the attitude of the teachers and their perceptions of the benefits of inclusion

	Total attitude	Subscale		
		Cognition	Affection	Behavior
1. Learning in inclusive schools prepares all children (with and without SEN) for the real world in a better way	<i>r</i> 0.627*	0.613*	0.516*	0.575*
2. In inclusive schools, children have a greater responsibility to respect and value human differences	<i>r</i> 0.537*	0.517*	0.391*	0.579*
3. In inclusive schools, learners with SEN have more opportunities to develop their academic competencies	<i>r</i> 0.554*	0.516*	0.453*	0.516*
4. In inclusive schools, the learning of children without SEN is compromised because the teacher needs more time to attend to the learners who do have such needs	<i>r</i> -0.558*	-0.589*	-0.451*	-0.459*
5. In inclusive schools, learners with SEN have more opportunities to nurture their personal and social development	<i>r</i> 0.454*	0.479*	0.331*	0.418*
6. In inclusive schools, children with SEN will be socially isolated from their classmates	<i>r</i> -0.496*	-0.446*	-0.432*	-0.444*
7. Inclusive schools are better prepared to respond to the needs of all learners, regardless of their condition	<i>r</i> 0.462*	0.446*	0.384*	0.391*
8. In the classrooms that have learners with SEN, the teachers must make changes in their teaching practice to benefit all learners	<i>r</i> 0.532*	0.530*	0.415*	0.509*
9. In inclusive schools, teachers are less satisfied with their work than in non-inclusive schools	<i>r</i> -0.454*	-0.417*	-0.402*	-0.381*
10. Having students with SEN helps teachers to reflect on their practices and consider improving them to ensure that all the children can learn	<i>r</i> 0.478*	0.517*	0.341*	0.430*

(Continues)

Table 3: (Continued)

		Total attitude	Subscale		
			Cognition	Affection	Behavior
11. In inclusive schools, the teachers tend to work in a way that they are more isolated from their colleagues	<i>r</i>	−0.505*	−0.525*	−0.373*	−0.479*
12. Working with learners who have specific educational support needs encourages teachers to train and work collaboratively with others	<i>r</i>	0.433*	0.453*	0.306*	0.394*
13. Inclusive schools have more reasons to feel proud for implementing values linked to equity	<i>r</i>	0.319*	0.350*	0.254*	0.245*
14. In inclusive schools, the work of the teachers is more demanding and tiring	<i>r</i>	−0.113	−0.103	−0.081	−0.144
15. In inclusive schools, the relationships with the parents are more collaborative	<i>r</i>	0.342*	0.362*	0.230*	0.347*
16. In inclusive schools, the parents are viewed as a problem rather than support for the classroom and the school	<i>r</i>	−0.478*	−0.470*	−0.344*	−0.474*

Note: **p* < 0.01. SEN: special educational needs.

relationship between these attitudes and their perceptions of the benefits of inclusion. Results have shown that, in general, teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusion and a positive perception of its benefits. These positive attitudes could be influenced by social desirability; however, it is particularly interesting to note that teachers with experience of working with learners with ASD have a better general attitude, and in particular, in their cognitive and affective components, compared to their peers without such experience. In addition, experienced teachers recognize more benefits of inclusion in terms of its value and benefits for all students, with and without ASD. Finally, a clear positive relationship was found between attitude and perceived benefits.

With regard to attitudes towards inclusion, it was found that all the participating teachers, that is, those with experience of working with learners with ASD *and* those without such experience, showed a positive attitude towards educational inclusion, both in the cognitive components, such as general beliefs about the philosophy behind inclusion, beliefs related to children's educational rights and knowledge about disabilities; and in the affective components, which are related to their perception of competence, confidence, frustration or irritation regarding their teaching performance with students with ASD/special educational needs. Similar results were obtained for the behavioral components, that is, teachers' willingness to implement educational change to ensure that their teaching reaches all learners, particularly those with ASD/special educational needs; this is in line with previous studies, such as those of Cassimos et al. (2015) and Park and Chitiyo (2011). These attitudes were especially positive in teachers with experience of working with learners with ASD. Experience is shown to be a facilitator of positive attitudes towards learners with disabilities, especially towards learners with ASD (Finke et al., 2009).

Experience of working with learners with ASD also influences the perceived benefits of inclusion. The teachers with experience with learners with ASD perceived greater benefits of inclusion than those without such experience. In line with the findings of previous studies (Hehir et al., 2016), this experience is considered beneficial for learners with special educational needs and their classmates without such needs. Specifically, in the present study, the perceived benefits of inclusion included the view that learners with special educational needs are better prepared for the real world and have more opportunities to develop their academic competencies and to nurture their personal and social development. The perceived benefits also included the view that those

learners without special educational needs are also better prepared for the real world and have a greater likelihood of respecting and valuing human differences. Likewise, in line with the findings reported by Hehir et al. (2016) and Kefallinou et al. (2020), the present study identified benefits for the teachers with respect to the fact that they engage in greater reflection on how to improve their teaching practice so that all children can learn, and the fact that they work collaboratively with other teachers. Lastly, benefits were identified for the school; specifically, schools are considered to be better prepared to respond to the needs of all students, regardless of their condition, and they have greater opportunities to take pride in their implementation of values linked to equity. All this shows that the teachers understood inclusive education as a principle that supports and welcomes diversity among all learners (Ainscow, 2020), rather than focusing exclusively on serving children with disabilities.

Considering that the teachers with previous experience strongly agreed with the idea that inclusive schools prepare all children for the real world in a better way, and that learners with specific educational support needs have more opportunities to promote their academic competencies, it could be suggested that the preconceived idea that children with special educational needs learn more and better in special schools is no longer widespread.

Likewise, it is considered that learners with specific educational support needs are not socially isolated from the rest of their classmates. This is why participants perceived that inclusive schools provide these learners with more opportunities to nurture their personal and social development, which can be explained by participants' perception that, in inclusive schools, children value human differences to a greater extent, leading to the development of values that would not be possible otherwise. These results are also in line with the findings of previous studies (Kefallinou et al., 2020).

Moreover, the perceived benefits of inclusion are related to the positive attitudes towards it in all the aspects we analyzed, except in the consideration of whether the work of teachers is more demanding and tiring in inclusive schools. Despite this exception, the participants did not perceive that they were less satisfied with their work or that they worked in a more isolated manner, which may be related to collaboration as a mechanism of teachers' well-being (Drossel et al., 2019), since they clearly perceived that, in inclusive

schools, teachers tend to collaborate more with other teachers and with the parents of the children.

Although all the participants showed generally positive perceptions of the benefits of inclusion, this study still found that teachers with experience with students with ASD express less agreement with the idea that the learning of children without specific educational support needs was compromised because the teacher needs more time to attend to their classmates with such needs. In this study, participants have shown that having experience with students with ASD has reduced their negative attitudes and beliefs about the inclusion of these students. Factors such as support, training and co-operation may also influence whether teachers' experiences are positive or negative. All of these aspects provide relevant keys to inclusive education that are related to the professional development of teachers, as several studies have pointed out (Grierson & Gallagher, 2009; Somma & Bennett, 2020): for example, implementing teacher-to-teacher support strategies, such as observing classes with inclusive practices, appointing mentor teachers to support inexperienced teachers, and so on. All of these strategies emerge as real facilitators for fundamental teacher attitudinal change towards inclusive education. With regard to the limitations of the study, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that the responses given could be biased by social desirability, although the anonymity of the responses may make this less likely to be the case.

Conclusions

To develop favorable attitudes towards inclusive education, as well as improving perceptions of the benefits of inclusion, it is necessary to create inclusive spaces in which teachers can have positive teaching and learning experiences with learners with ASD. Making use of the expert knowledge of other teachers and parents may be an important factor in creating these positive experiences. Collaboration with other teachers, with parents and between learners is an essential element in the development of educational environments that can respond to the needs of all learners (Simón et al., 2021), including those with ASD.

This in turn involves reviewing ways of supporting the professional development of teachers, with the aim of creating training opportunities through which teachers can experience success with the support of other teachers (Šegota et al., 2022). In this regard, one strategy could be to invite schools to

create structures in which teachers with experience of working with students with ASD could mentor other teachers (AuCoin et al., 2020).

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