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Students with Autism in Spain: Key Attitudes and Competences for Inclusion

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Abstract

Inclusive education aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This research analyzes the attitudes and competences of non-university Spanish teachers regarding the inclusion of students with ASD, considering relevant variables in previous studies such as teacher training, prior experience, and educational context, among others. The study involved a sample of 2310 teachers in active service during the 2023–2024 school year. Data collection was conducted through two questionnaires: the INTEA-EDG questionnaire, designed to measure teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the inclusion of students with ASD, and the CEFI-R questionnaire, which evaluates teachers' competencies and skills for inclusive education. The results reflect a generally positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools, although significant variations were found depending on variables such as previous experience, teaching specialization, and specific training received. Based on these and other findings, the study highlights the need to strengthen initial and continuous training in inclusive education and attention to diversity of students with ASD, promote early positive contact with students with ASD, and foster collaborative work and the design of inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: inclusive education; Autism Spectrum Disorder; teacher attitude; teacher training

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1. Introduction

1.1. Inclusive Education

The belief that change is possible underpins both individual growth and social progress (Freire, 1997). The challenge lies in transforming difficulties and uncertainties into concrete opportunities and actions. Education, recognized as a fundamental human right in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), plays a central role in promoting equity, justice, and peace (UNESCO, 2008). It enables individuals to develop their potential and pursue meaningful life projects.

Since this significant milestone, the evolution towards education as understood today has been marked by essential benchmarks reinforcing the commitment to inclusion and equity. The most significant international legal recognition of inclusive education is found in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations,

2006), which in Article 24 establishes inclusive education as a right and not merely a guiding principle (Echeita Sarrionandía & Ainscow, 2011). This normative framework also represented a paradigm shift, adopting a social model of disability (Victoria Maldonado, 2013) in education, recognizing that disability is not an attribute of the person but rather the result of their interaction with social barriers limiting their development and the enjoyment of fundamental rights. Inclusive values, aligned with attitudes, polices, and practices within educational contexts, are identified as a key element in overcoming these barriers (Booth et al., 2015).

More recently, the Incheon Declaration and its Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016), aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), have reinforced this global commitment by urging countries to "ensure inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2017). This process requires the involvement of the entire society and, particularly, the school community (Booth et al., 2015), including all students, teachers, families, educational institutions, and surrounding communities, to foster a culture based on safety, acceptance and collaboration underpinned by respect for human rights and stand against all forms of discrimination.

In Spain, the current Organic Law modifying the Organic Law on Education LOMLOE (Official State Gazette, 2020) recognizes inclusive education as a fundamental right of all students, with particular emphasis on those facing greatest barriers to access, participation, and development, defined in Article 73 as students with special educational needs (NEE). This group includes children and adolescents with ASD, who require educational planning that is both specific and common to their peers, alongside the implementation of diversity-focused measures facing social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. These measures ensure not only their right to quality education but also an educational experience that values and enhances their personal and social development.

1.2. Educational Inclusion of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) affecting how individuals perceive and socialize with others, causing varying degrees of challenge in social interaction, communication, and mental flexibility, including restricted and repetitive behaviors. Consequently, this diversity affects essential aspects of the educational context where interactions and processes depend on social relationships and verbal communication.

The interaction of individuals with ASD and their peers, teachers and other staff are a challenge for everyone involved. The critical objective is to facilitate and promote positive participation and development of students with ASD in educational settings. Social interactions, beliefs, and social structures influence the opportunities and barriers they face (Dalamitrou, 2024).

According to the First Action Plan resulting from the Spanish Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategy for the period of 2023–2027 (Spanish Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024), the number of students diagnosed with ASD has increased by 262.73% in the decade between the 2011–2012 and 2021–2022 school years. However, this increase has not been accompanied by a proportional expansion of educational administration resources, specialized support teachers in attention to diversity, or teacher training in the same proportion. This situation certainly generates tensions in the exercise of inclusion, as generalist teachers do not always feel prepared to respond to the education needs of these students (Fuster-Rico et al., 2023; Nistal et al., 2023). Regarding the type of schooling (Autism Confederation Spain, 2021), data from the Spanish Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports (MEFPD) indicate that 84.1% of these students attend mainstream schools, where they are included within the class group and the teaching and learning processes that take place,

although their presence in higher school and vocational training is notably limited. However, some studies highlight that the real presence of these students in regular classrooms is quite low (Feldman et al., 2015; Teixeira de Matos & Morgado, 2016), identifying this as a crucial aspect to address to achieve genuine inclusion (Jodra-Chuan, 2024); this data shows how specialized support teachers carry out their work outside the student group, in specific support classrooms from a segregated point of view. Research demonstrates that inclusion in regular educational settings significantly fosters social and communicative skills in students with ASD by increasing peer interactions, reducing learning barriers, and facilitating social inclusion (Anee & Ibrahim, 2025; Fárez et al., 2025; Larcombe et al., 2019). In addition, recent studies on families of ASD students in our country identified that they are satisfied with the schooling and attitudes of teachers, considering the deficiency of material resources and specialized teachers in diversity and inclusion the most negative aspect for the development of their children (Martínez García & Ferrando Prieto, 2023).

Furthermore, recent findings identify several critical factors for ensuring inclusive education for these students (Gómez-Marí et al., 2022a; Jodra-Chuan, 2024; Zambrano-Garcés & Orellana-Zambrano, 2018). Key among these are prior experience with individuals with ASD (Larcombe et al., 2019), specialized support teacher ratios (Pérez-Gutiérrez et al., 2020), teaching experience (Hernández González et al., 2021; Linton et al., 2015; Taliaferro et al., 2015), school performance (Keen et al., 2015), collaborative participation of the educational community (Josilowski & Morris, 2019), curriculum adaptations, supports and resources (Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023; Waddington & Reed, 2017), educational stage (Collado-Sanchis et al., 2020), core characteristics of ASD (González de Rivera Romero et al., 2022) and, particularly, teachers' knowledge, training, and attitudes towards inclusion (González de Rivera Romero et al., 2022; Larcombe et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2022; Zambrano-Garcés & Orellana-Zambrano, 2018). In addition, collaborative work, co-teaching and the use of active methodologies (López-Vélez & Galarraga, 2024), together with valuing families' knowledge and experience (Lilley, 2015) and the support and empathy of families without children with special educational needs, emerge as key facilitators. These factors were identified in a recent review studies (González de Rivera Romero et al., 2022), alongside environmental adjustments catering to individual student needs (sensory sensitivities, changes in work plans, etc.) (Autism Confederation Spain, 2021). This environmental factor is foundational for inclusion, contrasting exclusionary views that expect students to adapt to the environment (Echeita Sarrionandia et al., 2017; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). Furthermore, hostile environments can exacerbate behavioral issues in students with ASD (Hersh & Elley, 2019), a significant barrier to full inclusion, according to school administrators, teachers, and families (Bush et al., 2017; Samadi & McConkey, 2018).

Therefore, inclusion relates not only to the learning environment but also to the relationships and interactions among its participants, curriculum flexibility, teaching and learning methodologies, and teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards diversity management, all of which influence their commitment and ability to implement diversified educational practices (Tomlinson, 2001). And really, measuring the complexity of attitudes requires understanding teachers' perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and abilities regarding inclusion, breaking down the analysis into cognitive, affective, and behavioral spheres to capture their predisposition and coping with change (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Additionally, several authors have indicated that the main benefit of inclusive education for students with ASD is interaction with the broader community, which significantly reduces the risks of isolation, educational exclusion (Majoko, 2016; Vidal, 2024), bullying and social marginalization (Autism Confederation Spain, 2021). Inclusive interactions foster the development of positive interpersonal attitudes, encouraging all students to engage

respectfully and empathetically, thereby facilitating enhanced social skill development and promoting meaningful peer socialization opportunities (Robertson et al., 2003).

Other studies highlight the critical role of inclusive education in fostering a stronger and more positive self-concept among students with ASD, which subsequently contributes to their enhanced emotional well-being, overall quality of life, and personal development (Maradiaga González & Calvo Escalona, 2021). Crucially, effective collaboration among all members of the educational community further amplifies these positive outcomes (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

Clearly, some of the results of the inclusion education practices of students with ASD in mainstream schools are promising, showing additional benefits such as improved academic achievement (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998) and notable advances in cognitive and adaptive skills (Vivanti et al., 2018), with peers' prosocial behavior identified as a fundamental element of success (Rattaz et al., 2020).

Despite these encouraging results, significant structural and pedagogical barriers continue to hinder the full realization of inclusive education, underscoring the need for targeted research into the specific conditions that enable or hinder effective practice (Verdugo Alonso et al., 2018).

1.3. Inclusive Teachers

In Spain, the support for the inclusion of students with ASD falls primarily on teachers historically linked to special education since the 1980s: specialists in Therapeutic Pedagogy (TP) and Hearing and Language (HL). These professionals, together with educational counselors, are responsible for attending to diversity in primary and secondary schools. Their professional role is currently transitioning from a palliative and segregating vision to one more focused on mediation for the learning of all students based on an inclusive pedagogy (Márquez Ordóñez, 2024), as methodological advisors, promoters of the universal design for learning (UDL), co-teachers along ordinary classroom teachers, and institutional transformation agents for the effective enforcement of the right to inclusive education (Sandoval Mena et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this teaching profile still presents great differences in its definition, training, functions and levels of coordination within educational centers in Spain. With respect to the ratio of ordinary teachers/specialist teachers (TP and HL), there is a high variability between the different countries. In Spain there is one teacher specialized in diversity and inclusion (TP or HL) for every 11 generalist teachers in ordinary schools. In other countries like Sweden, Denmark and France, there is one specialist (TP or HL) for every 4 or 5 primary school teachers (Taliaferro et al., 2015).

In the Spanish education system, educational guidance specialists and teachers of Therapeutic Pedagogy (TP) and Hearing and Language (HL), who have greater specialized training in the knowledge of educational support needs and personalized educational response, are key figures in the development and advancement of inclusive education. They are references in the guidance and development of personalized methodological strategies and support systems both inside and outside the classroom (Márquez Ordóñez, 2024; Sandoval Mena et al., 2019). These teachers (HL and TP) specialize in attending to special educational needs, communication, learning and behavioral disorders, etc., and in developing individualized strategies. In total, there are 3 subjects (18 credits) that grant their specialization, such as Inclusive Schools, Psychology of Disability or Learning, Development and Attention to Diversity, Difficulties in Language and Communication and Intervention and Inclusive Schools and Classrooms, among other options in Spanish universities.

Furthermore, it is indisputable that, for the inclusion of students with ASD, the role of teachers is crucial, serving as catalysts for transformation and continuous improvement

within the education systems (Román Meléndez et al., 2021). Positioned centrally in the learning process and interacting with all involved stakeholders, teachers significantly influence the success of inclusive educational practices.

According to the First Autism Action Plan 2023–2027 (Spanish Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024), approximately 75% of teachers have received specialized training outside the continuous training offered by the Educational Administration. In addition, many educators identify a clear gap and express a significant need for additional targeted training (Anglim et al., 2018; Lisak Šegota et al., 2020). The LOMLOE (Official State Gazette, 2020) emphasizes that specialized training is essential to guarantee inclusive education, highlighting the necessity of equipping teachers with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes to implement inclusion effectively.

Recognizing this importance, the European Agency for Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education initiated the "Teacher Training for Inclusion" project in 2009. Their latest report (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022) underscores the critical importance of collaborative practices in inclusive education, outlining four fundamental values essential for inclusive teachers: valuing diversity, supporting all students, engaging in teamwork, and promoting ongoing professional and personal growth. The positive attitudes of future teachers are a pivotal factor in the achievement of inclusive education for students with educational needs (Majoko, 2016).

Regarding teacher profiles, specialists in educational guidance, attention to diversity and inclusion (TP and HL), and technical assistants generally feel more qualified to support students with ASD, while other teachers frequently request additional specialized training (Spanish Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024). Both specialist and general educators recognize the importance of teamwork for planning and delivering inclusive educational practices. This collaboration, supported by empirical evidence (Boujut et al., 2016) contributes significantly to increased educator commitment and positive educational outcomes for students with ASD (López-Vélez & Galarraga, 2024).

1.4. Purpose of This Research

In this context, the present study aims to deepen the understanding of the Spanish non-university educational system for the inclusion of students with ASD, across all educational stages and modalities of schooling, to identify the variables that modulate this process. The research questions are:

- What are the attitudes and beliefs of Spanish non-university teachers toward the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools, and how confident do they feel in supporting them?
- How do variables such as prior experience with individuals with ASD, teaching specialization, years of experience, type of school, and educational stage influence teacher's attitudes toward inclusive education?
- What is the relationship between teacher's attitudes toward inclusion and their perceived competences in key inclusive dimensions like teaching methods and support systems?
- How are students with ASD distributed across educational stages and school types in Spain, and how do their perceived support needs influence teacher's inclusive attitudes?
- What factors emerge as facilitators or barriers for effective inclusion of students with ASD in the Spanish educational system?

And finally, the specific objectives are:

1. To examine the attitudes and perceived preparedness of Spanish teachers, at schools and high schools, for the inclusive education of students with ASD in mainstream

schools, analyzing the potential relationship between these attitudes and variables such as the core characteristics of ASD, educational stage, teaching specialization and specific training received.
2. To analyze the influence of contextual a professional variables on teacher's inclusive attitudes in key dimensions: conceptions of diversity, provision of support, use of diversified methodologies, collaborative practices, and community engagement.
3. To explore the distribution of students with ASD within the Spanish educational system and assess the perceived levels of support they require (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), according to the teacher's perception, to obtain an approximate map of the inclusion of students with ASD in Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 2310 in-service teachers during the 2023–2024 academic year. All Spanish Autonomous Communities were represented, with the highest representation from Andalucía (16.6%), Comunidad Valenciana (16.2%), Murcia (10%), Castilla-La Macha (8.5%), Asturias (8.4%), Cataluña (7.9%), Islas Canarias (7.6%) and Cantabria (7.3%). Furthermore, 80.1% of the participants were women, and approximately 68% were over the age of 41. A significant proportion (87.3%) reported having positive experiences with students with ASD.

Regarding educational stage in which they were teaching, 25.2% worked in the non-compulsory stage of Early Childhood Education (ECE) which covers children from 0 to 6 years old, 31% in Primary Education (PE) with children between 6 and 12 years old, 1.9% in Compulsory Basic Education (CBE) with population between 6 and 16 years old schooled in special education centers, 23.3% in Compulsory Secondary Education (CSE) with children and adolescents between 12 and 16 years of age, 10.8% in post-compulsory Baccalaureate (Bach) with adolescents between 16 and 18 years of age or more, 6.7% in Vocational Training (VT) with adolescents from 15 to 18 years or older and 1.2% in Transition to Adult Life programs (TAL), post-compulsory educational stage for students with special needs in Spain, which is generally taken from 16 to 21 years old. The majority (86.5%) indicated that their choice of profession was motivated by a strong vocational calling. In addition, 84.4% maintained regular and close contact with vulnerable individuals, and just over 50% had experience providing non-formal education to this population.

In terms of educational context, 78% of the teachers worked in mainstream schools, 15.5% in mainstream schools with a special education classroom, 3.4% in special education centers and 3.1% in other types of institutions. Furthermore, 83.9% were employed in public schools, 13.8% in state-subsidized (concerted) schools and 2.4% in private schools. Finally, with regard to training in educational support for students with ASD, 47.7% of the participants reported having received 10 h or less of preparation in this area. Table 1 provides a more detailed description of the general characteristics of the study participants. It should be noted that teachers specializing in Therapeutic Pedagogy and Hearing and Language have been appointed as "Specialists in Diversity and Inclusion" to facilitate the writing of results and conclusions, and that teachers specializing in early childhood and primary education correspond to teachers specializing in Physical education, English and Music for these stages, with non-specialized teachers acting as tutors or as general support in the classrooms.

Table 1. General characteristics of the sample.

Study Variables		N	%
Age	25 years old or younger	24	1.0
	Between 26 and 30 years old	179	7.7
	Between 31 and 40 years old	506	21.9
	Between 41 and 50 years old	871	37.7
	51 years old or older	730	31.6
Motivation for choosing the teaching profession	Vocational calling.	1997	86.5
	Opportunity for stable employment	152	6.6
	Lack of better career prospects	26	1.1
	Influence of a teacher who significantly impacted education	50	2.2
	Influence of a family member who is or was a teacher	85	3.7
Teaching specialization	Early Childhood Education Teacher (ECE)	180	7.8
	Primary Education Teacher (PE)	231	10.0
	Early Childhood and Primary Education Specialist (ECPE)	173	7.5
	Specialist in Diversity and Inclusion (SDI)	493	21.3
	Educational Guidance Specialist (EGS)	353	15.3
	Compulsory Secondary Education Teacher (CSE)	608	26.3
	Member of School Leadership Team (SLT)	272	11.8
Years of teaching experience	Less than 5 years	389	16.8
	Between 5 and 10 years	434	18.8
	Between 11 and 15 years	255	11.0
	Between 16 and 25 years	708	30.6
	More than 25 years	524	22.7
Hours of training in educational support for students with ASD	Up to 10 h of training.	1101	47.7
	Between 11 and 30 h of training	311	13.5
	Between 31 and 60 h of training	306	13.2
	Between 61 and 100 h of training	247	10.7
	Between 101 and 200 h of training	177	7.7
	Between 201 and 300 h of training	58	2.5
	Between 301 and 400 h of training	15	.6
	Between 401 and 500 h of training	35	1.5
	More than 500 h of training	60	2.6
Experience with individuals with ASD and its assessment.	Yes, and the experience was positive.	1933	83.7
	Yes, and the experience was negative.	192	8.3
	No	185	8.0

The recruitment process relied on voluntary participation through an online questionnaire disseminated to schools, which were then encouraged to forward the invitation to their teaching staff. Due to this indirect distribution method, it was not possible to determine the exact number of teachers initially contacted, and thus no response rate could be calculated.

2.2. Instrument

For data collection, the questionnaire "Inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder" (INTEA) was used, which integrates five validated tools based on a Spanish sample. Due to their relevance to the present study and its objectives, two of these instruments were selected:

- **Attitudes of Regular Educators toward the Inclusion of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (AREISA)** (Showalter-Barnes, 2008). The AREISA consists of 22 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. These items measure teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms. The Spanish version,

translated by Gómez-Marí et al. (2022b), was used. Although the original version of the instrument (Showalter-Barnes, 2008) demonstrated reliability and validity, the psychometric properties have not been analyzed by confirmatory factor analysis, limiting the original analysis to the principal components. For this reason, after data collection, a validation process was undertaken to adapt and confirm the suitability of this instrument for the current research.

To determine the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis, the Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity were applied. The KMO value (KMO = 0.924) indicated excellent sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test yielded a chi-square value of 11,090.214 ($p < 0.001$), supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. The analysis resulted in five correlated factors explaining 61.22% of the variance; however, the item distribution did not align with the original scale structure. Therefore, reliability analyses were conducted to identify those factors that best captured teachers' attitudes across all non-university educational levels. Items showing robust reliability in measuring components of teacher attitudes toward the inclusion of students with ASD and already included in the confirmatory factor analysis were retained.

Ultimately, a new instrument was developed consisting of 2 factors closely aligned with the original AREISA factors 1 and 2 (Showalter-Barnes, 2008), demonstrating strong internal consistency: Factor 1 Beliefs/Attitudes towards the inclusion of students with ASD (α 0.850); Factor 2 Benefits of the inclusion of ASD students (α 0.832). This adaptation gave rise to the INTEA-EDG Questionnaire, composed of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 Strongly disagree; 2 Disagree; 3 Agree; 4 Strongly agree).

- **Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Teacher Training for Inclusion (CEFI-R)** (González-Gil et al., 2017). The CEFI-R is a multidimensional instrument consisting of 16 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1-Strongly disagree to 4-Strongly agree) designed to measure teachers' attitudes, competencies, skills and abilities for inclusive education across various educational domains. This instrument complements and enhances the previous questionnaire by offering a broader perspective on other essential aspects in the development of inclusive education, fully aligned with the dimensions outlined in the Profile of the Inclusive Teacher (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). The four dimensions of this instrument are: Dimension 1 (D1) Conception of diversity; Dimension 2 (D2) Methodology; Dimension 3 (D3) Supports; and Dimension 4 (D4) Community Participation.

2.3. Procedure

The INTEA questionnaire was designed to be completed online, anonymously, and voluntarily. It was hosted on the Google Forms platform and distributed to schools via email. The email was addressed to the leadership team of the centers for distribution among the teaching staff of the centers. The collected data were subsequently analyzed using the statistical software IBM SPSS-25.

2.4. Data Analysis

In addition to descriptive statistics, the following procedures (Blanca et al., 2017) were used for statistical analysis. First, bivariate analysis was conducted using Student's *t*-test to compare mean differences in responses when the comparison criterion consisted of two groups. Second, one-way ANOVA test were applied to examine mean differences when the comparison criterion involved more than two groups, such as the educational stage, among others. When statistically significant differences were found, post hoc analyses were conducted using DMS (method of the Minimum Significant Difference, Fisher or LSD) to explore the nature of those differences in greater detail.

3. Results

3.1. Core Characteristics Observed in Students with ASD

To complete the INTEA-EDG questionnaire, teachers were asked to reflect on a specific student in order to assess observable characteristics related to the core domains of ASD, based on the diagnostic levels outlined in the DSM V-TR diagnostic manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2022) (Table 2). Teachers had the option to abstain from responding if they lacked sufficient information; 9.5% chose not to answer regarding *Social communication*, and 15% did so for *Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors*. While these reports do not constitute valid clinical diagnoses, they contribute valuable qualitative insight and facilitate reflection on the distribution of students with ASD across educational stages, as perceived by teaching professionals.

Table 2. Assessment of Core Characteristics in students with ASD.

Variables		N	%
Social Communication	Difficulty initiating social interactions and clear examples of atypical or unsuccessful responses to social overtures of others. For example, a person who is able to speak in full sentences and engages in communication but whose to-and-fro conversation with others fails, and whose attempts to make friends are odd and typically unsuccessful (Level 1).	736	31.9
	Marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills. Limited initiation of social interactions; and reduced or abnormal responses to social overtures from others (Level 2).	877	38.0
	Severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills cause severe impairments in functioning, very limited initiation of social interactions, and minimal response to social overtures from others (Level 3).	477	20.6
Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behavior	Inflexibility of behavior causes significant interference with functioning in one or more contexts. Difficulty switching between activities. Problems of organization and planning hamper independence. (Level 1).	396	17.1
	Inflexibility of behavior, difficulty coping with change, or other restricted/repetitive behaviors appear frequently enough to be obvious to the casual observer and interfere with functioning in a variety of contexts. Distress and/or difficulty changing focus or action (Level 2).	1249	54.1
	Inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change, or other restricted/repetitive behaviors markedly interfere with functioning in all spheres. Great distress/difficulty changing focus or action. (Level 3).	318	13.8

The literature offers limited evidence regarding the distribution of ASD severity levels. However, some studies suggest that Level 2 is the most prevalent, despite significant heterogeneity among diagnosed individuals (Autismo Diario, 2024). According to the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), the levels of support associated with diagnostic severity are defined as: Level 1 "Requiring support," Level 2 "Requiring substantial support," and Level 3 "Requiring very substantial support".

With respect to *Social communication*, the teachers identify a higher percentage of students at Level 1 in the CSE (43.3% of the stage), Bach. (46.18% of the stage) and VT (39.35% of the stage); a higher percentage of at Level 2 in ECE (44.92% of the stage), PE (41.2% of the stage) and TAL (39.29% of the stage); and a greater presence of students

at Level 3 in CBE (41.87%) and TAL (39.29% of the stage). Among 2090 responses that identified a "level" of *Social communication* difficulty, 35.21% were categorized as Level 1: 81.52% of these students attended mainstream schools, 14.13% were in mainstream schools with a special education classroom, 1.37% in special education centers, and 2.98% in other types of institutions. For Level 2, 41.96% of responses: 79.7% were in mainstream schools, 14.94% in mainstream with special classrooms, 2.85% in special education centers, and 2.5% in other settings. For Level 3 (22.84% of responses): 68.76% were in mainstream settings, 19.7% in mainstream schools with a special classroom, 8.59% in special education centers, and 2.95% in other types of schools.

In terms of *Restricted, repetitive patterns behavior*, the majority of students (63.62%) were classified at Level 2 across all educational stages: 67.28% in Transition to Adult Life (TAL), 58.13% in Compulsory Basic Education (CBE), 57.68% in Primary Education (PE), 56.62% in Early Childhood Education (ECE), 47.79% in Baccalaureate (Bach), and 45.80% in Vocational Training (VT). Out of the 1963 responses identifying a level in this domain, 20.17% were categorized as Level 1: 82.58% in mainstream schools, 12.63% in mainstream schools with special classrooms, 1.51% in special education centers, and 3.28% in other institutions. Level 2 accounted for 63.62% of responses: 77.5% of these students were in mainstream settings, 16.25% in mainstream schools with special classrooms, 3.76% in special education centers, and 2.49% in other types of schools. Finally, Level 3 comprised 16.21%: 70.44% in mainstream schools, 19.81% in mainstream with special classrooms, 7.24% in special education centers, and 2.51% in other school types.

3.2. INTEA-EDG Questionnaire

The results obtained from this instrument are shown in Table 3. They indicate a predominantly positive attitude toward the inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classrooms and schools.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics—INTEA-EDG Factors.

INTEA-EDG Factors	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
F1 Beliefs and attitude towards the inclusion of students with ASD	3.00	1.00	4.00	3.0215	0.56460
F2 Benefits of the inclusion of students with ASD	3.00	1.00	4.00	2.9647	0.53418

3.2.1. F1 Beliefs and Attitude Towards the Inclusion of Students with ASD

Within this factor, 80.9% of respondents agreed with the statement of "Inclusion is the most appropriate way to support students with autism", and 90.7% agreed that "Inclusion will benefit their classmates, as they will learn to work and coexist with people with functional diversity". No statistically significant differences were found in relation to school ownership, educational stage, or gender. However, several other variables emerged as significant modulators of positive attitudes.

The variable "experience with people with ASD" showed significant differences ($F = 109.783$; $p < 0.001$) (Table 4), with more favorable attitudes reported by those who had prior positive experiences. This group differed significantly from both those who had negative experiences ($p < 0.001$) and those with not prior experience ($p < 0.001$).

Table 4. Differences between INTE-EDG Factors and Experience with ASD- ANOVA.

INTEA-EDG Factors	Experience with Individuals with ASD	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
F1 Beliefs and attitude towards the inclusion of students with ASD	Yes, positive	1933	3.0886	0.52244	109.783	<0.001
	Yes, negative	192	2.5125	0.61928		
	No experience	185	2.8486	0.62346		
F2 Benefits of the inclusion of students with ASD	Yes, positive	1933	3.0310	0.49573	114.740	<0.001
	Yes, negative	192	2.4865	0.58946		
	No experience	185	2.7676	0.56205		

"Teaching specialization" (Table 5) was another significant modulating variable for Factor 1 (F = 13.502; $p < 0.001$). Teachers specializing in Diversity and Inclusion (SDI) and Educational Guidance (EGS) exhibited significantly more positive attitudes compared to Early Childhood and Primary Education Specialists (ECPE) ($p < 0.001$), Primary Tutors (PET) ($p < 0.001$), and Early Childhood Tutors (ECET) ($p < 0.008$). Furthermore, specialists in Diversity and Inclusion (SDI) showed more positive attitudes than Secondary Education Teachers (CSET) ($p = 0.006$) and members of school leadership teams (SLT) ($p = 0.036$). Educational Guidance (EGS) consistently displayed the most positive attitudes across all specializations ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Differences between INTEA-EDG Factors and teaching specialization- ANOVA.

INTEA-EDG Factors	Teaching Specialization	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
F1 Beliefs and attitude towards the inclusion of students with ASD	Early Childhood Teachers (ECET)	180	2.8933	0.51715	13.502	<0.001
	Primary Education Teachers (PET)	231	2.9489	0.59387		
	Specialist in Early and Primary Education (ECPE)	173	2.9202	0.56927		
	Specialist in Diversity and Inclusion (SDI)	493	3.0665	0.52680		
	Educational Guidance Specialist (EGS)	353	3.2357	0.48427		
	Secondary Education Teacher (CSET)	608	2.9740	0.60502		
	School Leadership Team (SLT)	272	2.9787	0.56017		
F2 Benefits of the inclusion of ASD students	Early Childhood Education Teacher (ECET)	180	2.8589	0.51250	16.137	<0.001
	Primary Education Teacher (PET)	231	2.9506	0.55622		
	Specialist in Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE)	173	2.8301	0.54944		
	Specialist in Diversity and Inclusion (SDI)	493	3.0442	0.49246		
	Educational Guidance Specialist (EGS)	353	3.1530	0.47881		
	Secondary Education Teacher (CSET)	608	2.8674	0.55486		
	School Leadership Team (LST)	272	2.9610	0.52715		

Regarding the "type of school", results (F = 8.225; $p < 0.001$) reveal a more favorable attitude among teachers working in mainstream schools compared to those in mainstream schools with a special education classroom ($p < 0.001$) or in special education centers ($p = 0.010$).

For "age groups" (F = 5.756; $p < 0.001$), teachers aged 25 years or younger exhibited significantly more positive attitudes than those aged 41–50 ($p = 0.005$), 51 or older ($p = 0.008$), and those between 31 and 40 years old ($p = 0.012$).

Regarding "motivation for becoming teachers" (F = 5.636; $p < 0.001$), higher scores in F1 were observed among those who entered the teaching profession out of vocation.

Moreover, teachers who had received training through "public administrations" (t = 4.925; $p < 0.001$), those maintaining close and frequent "contact with people in situations of vulnerability" (t = 4.526; $p < 0.001$), those with "non-formal teaching experience"

with this group (t = 3.603; $p < 0.001$), and those with a higher number of "training hours" (F = 3.499; $p < 0.001$) showed attitudes more aligned with inclusion. In contrast, the most negative attitudes were found among those with only 0–10 h of training.

Finally, "years of teaching experience" (F = 3.096; $p = 0.015$) also proved significant: teachers with less than 5 years of experience demonstrated more positive attitudes than those with more than 25 years ($p = 0.003$), between 11 and 15 years ($p = 0.004$), and between 5 and 10 years ($p = 0.020$).

3.2.2. F2 Benefits of the Inclusion of Students with ASD

Regarding the second factor (Table 3), 85.2% of the sample agreed that "Inclusion increases the self-esteem of students with ASD", 80.4% stated that "Inclusion fosters the development of social skills in students with ASD", and 83.4% affirmed that "Inclusion enhances interactions with their peers and teachers". As with the previous factor, no statistically significant differences were found in the variables of school ownership, educational stage, or gender.

With respect to moderating variables, statistically significant differences were observed between groups in the variable "experience with people with ASD" (Table 4) with F = 114.740 and $p < 0.001$. Participants with positive experiences perceived significantly greater benefits compared to those with negative experiences ($p < 0.001$) or no experience at all ($p < 0.001$).

Statistically significant differences were also found in relation to "teaching specialization" (Table 5), "motivation for choosing the teaching profession" (F = 7.175; $p < 0.001$), "hours of training" received (F = 5.928; $p < 0.001$), "type of school" (F = 5.707; $p = 0.001$), "experience in non-formal teaching" (t = 5.128; $p < 0.001$) and close and habitual "contact with vulnerable people" (t = 4.217; $p < 0.001$).

Regarding "teaching specialization", Educational Guidance (EGS) demonstrated the most positive view of inclusion benefits compared to all other specializations ($p < 0.001$), including SDI ($p = 0.003$). Additionally, school leadership teams showed more favorable perceptions than specialists in Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECEP) ($p = 0.010$) and Secondary Education teachers (CSET) ($p = 0.014$).

In terms of "motivation for teaching" (F = 7.175; $p < 0.001$), teachers who chose the profession out of vocation showed significantly more positive responses than those who became teachers due to a lack of better options after graduation ($p < 0.001$), the opportunity of stable employment ($p = 0.003$), or the influence of a family member who was or is a teacher ($p = 0.014$).

Significant differences were also found for those who received training through the "public administration" (t = 6.584; $p < 0.001$) and for the "hours of training" received (F = 5.928; $p < 0.001$), demonstrated a significantly more negative view of the benefits of inclusion the teachers with only 0 to 10 h of training.

Furthermore, teachers in mainstream schools scored higher in this F2 than those working in mainstream schools with a special education classroom ($p = 0.001$) or in a special education center ($p = 0.006$).

Lastly, for the "age" variable (F = 3.762; $p = 0.005$), teachers aged 51 or older had a more negative perception of inclusion benefits compared to those aged 26 to 30 ($p = 0.004$), 25 or younger ($p = 0.013$) and 31- 40 ($p = 0.039$). Also, those aged 41–50 held significantly more negative views than teachers aged 26–30 ($p = 0.024$) and 25 or younger ($p = 0.025$).

3.2.3. Inclusion of Students with ASD in Mainstream Schools and Observed Core Characteristics

To assess the influence of this variable, the analysis focused on the subset of participants who identified observable characteristics related to *Social communication* and *Restricted,*

repetitive patterns behavior. The first subsample (subsample 1) included 2090 participants, and the second (subsample 2) included 1963 participants.

The results (Tables 6 and 7) suggest that, if the teachers' observations were to correlate with students' clinical diagnoses, significant differences would exist between groups across both factors studied, with observed *Social communication* playing a particularly influential role. For this characteristic, participants who observed Level 1 and Level 2 scored significantly higher on F1 (Beliefs and Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Students with ASD) than those who observed Level 3 ($p < 0.001$ in both cases). The same pattern of results was found for F2 (Perceived Benefits of Including Students with ASD).

Table 6. Differences between INTEA-EDG Factors and *Social communication*—ANOVA.

INTEA-EDG Factors	Social Communication	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
F1 Beliefs and attitudes toward inclusion of students with ASD	Level 1	736	3.1236	0.52340	57.725	<0.001
	Level 2	877	3.0794	0.51745		
	Level 3	477	2.7958	0.63562		
F2 Benefits of inclusion of students with ASD	Level 1	736	3.0568	0.49999	56.272	<0.001
	Level 2	877	3.0210	0.48231		
	Level 3	477	2.7497	0.62644		

Table 7. Differences between INTEA-EDG Factors and *Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior*—ANOVA.

INTEA-EDG Factors	Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behavior	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
F1 Beliefs and attitudes towards the inclusion of students with ASD	Level 1	396	3.0924	0.53405	29.302	<0.001
	Level 2	1249	3.0613	0.53677		
	Level 3	318	2.8101	0.65067		
F2 Benefits of the inclusion of ASD students	Level 1	396	3.0566	0.50620	27.956	<0.001
	Level 2	1249	2.9944	0.51241		
	Level 3	318	2.7761	0.61562		

Regarding *Restricted, repetitive patterns behavior* (Table 7), the same significant differences were observed across groups for both F1 and F2: participants who reported Level 1 or Level 2 expressed more positive attitudes and perceptions than those reporting Level 3 ($p < 0.001$ for all comparisons). Additionally, for F2, a statistically significant—though smaller—difference was found between Level 1 and Level 2 ($p = 0.042$).

3.3. Questionnaire for the Evaluation of Teacher Training for Inclusion CEFI-R

3.3.1. D1 Conception of Diversity

The results obtained in Dimension 1 (Table 8) reveal participants' perspectives on the concept of diversity, including their views on the placement and manner of schooling for students with specific and special educational needs, the educational policies that underpin such decisions, and ultimately, the individual interpretation of inclusive education (Boujut et al., 2016).

According to the data, 80.1% of the sample agreed with having students with specific educational support needs (SESN) included in mainstream classrooms, with 82.3% rejecting the notion that their presence negatively affects other students. However, 37.6% have shown concern about the increase in workload, and 30.4% believed that SESN are unable to keep up with the pace of learning in mainstream settings.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics CEFI-R Dimensions.

CEFI-R Dimensions	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
D1 Conception of diversity	3.00	1.00	4.00	1.9238	0.56270
D2 Methodology	3.00	1.00	4.00	2.7682	0.38881
D3 Supports	3.00	1.00	4.00	2.7216	0.36940
D4 Community Participation	3.00	1.00	4.00	2.9150	0.25268

As with the previous instrument, statistically significant differences were found between groups (Table 9) in relation to the variable "experience with people with ASD" (F = 130.306; $p < 0.001$). Participants who reported negative experiences showed a significantly less favorable view of inclusive education compared to those with no experience or those with positive experiences ($p < 0.001$ in both cases).

Table 9. Differences between the CEFI-R Dimensions and Experience with ASD—ANOVA.

CEFI-R Dimensions	Experience with Individuals with ASD	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
D1 Conception of diversity	Yes, positive	1933	1.8469	0.53236	130.306	<0.001
	Yes, negative	192	2.4206	0.47641		
	No experience	185	2.2122	0.59884		
D2 Methodologies	Yes, positive	1933	2.8041	0.35721	63.013	<0.001
	Yes, negative	192	2.6687	0.45793		
	No experience	185	2.4962	0.49127		
D3 Supports	Yes, positive	1933	2.7399	0.35194	25.397	<0.001
	Yes, negative	192	2.5443	0.50390		
	No experience	185	2.7014	0.32292		
D4 Community Participation	Yes, positive	1933	2.9198	0.25188	2.282	0.102
	Yes, negative	192	2.8837	0.24788		
	No experience	185	2.8973	0.26402		

Regarding "teaching specialization" (F = 60.728; $p < 0.001$), classroom tutors in Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECET and PET), educational guidance specialists (EGS), Secondary Education teachers (CSET), and members of management teams (SLT) held a less favorable view of inclusive education compared to specialists in diversity and inclusion (SDI) and Educational Guidance (EGS) ($p < 0.001$ in all cases). Similarly, Secondary Education teachers reported significantly more negative perceptions than both Early Childhood and Primary tutors ($p = 0.002$ and $p = 0.009$, respectively).

Statistically significant differences also emerged based on "motivation" for entering the teaching profession (F = 20.883; $p < 0.001$). Participants who entered teaching out of vocational calling reported significantly more positive views on inclusion ($p < 0.001$ in all cases).

Regarding "training hours" (F = 18.587; $p < 0.001$), and the "type of training" received (t = −9.275; $p < 0.001$), teachers who had completed courses offered by private institutions showed significantly more inclusive attitudes. Notably, those with only 0–10 h or 11–30 h of training held more negative attitudes compared to those with more extensive training ($p < 0.001$ in all cases).

There were also significant group differences based on whether participants had "regular contact with vulnerable individuals" (t = −9.089; $p < 0.001$), the "type of school" (F = 7.838; $p < 0.001$) and whether they had "informal teaching experience" with this population (t = −7.131; $p < 0.001$). Concerning the "type of school" (Table 10), teachers in

special education schools expressed significantly more negative attitudes towards inclusive education compared to other categories ($p < 0.001$).

Table 10. Differences between the CEFI-R Dimensions and Type of School—ANOVA.

Dimensions CEFI-R	Type of School	N	Mean	SD	F	*p*
D1 Conception of diversity	Mainstream School	1802	1.9341	0.56362	7.838	<0.001
	Mainstream School with special education classroom	358	1.9567	0.54446		
	Special Education school	79	1.6582	0.56070		
	Other	71	1.7923	0.55095		
D2 Methodology	Mainstream School	1802	2.7582	0.38988	1.921	0.124
	Mainstream School with special education classroom	358	2.7983	0.36191		
	Special Education school	79	2.8203	0.50596		
	Other	71	2.8141	0.33179		
D3 Supports	Mainstream School	1802	2.7229	0.36380	3.850	0.009
	Mainstream School with special education classroom	358	2.6858	0.38356		
	Special Education school	79	2.8386	0.36037		
	Other	71	2.7042	0.39935		
D4 Community Participation	Mainstream School	1802	2.9216	0.24491	3.434	0.016
	Mainstream School with special education classroom	358	2.9004	0.24763		
	Special Education school	79	2.8354	0.39539		
	Other	71	2.9108	0.25794		

As for the "educational stage" ($F = 5.996$; $p < 0.001$), Secondary Education teachers (CSE) held more negative perception than those in Primary Education (PE) ($p = 0.004$), TAL ($p = 0.005$) and ECE ($p = 0.009$). Similarly, teachers in Baccalaureate and Vocational Training expressed less favorable opinions than those in Early Childhood ($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$), Primary ($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$), CBE ($p = 0.023$ and $p = 0.019$) and TAL ($p = 0.001$ in both cases).

Finally, male teachers in the sample reported significantly more negative perceptions of inclusive education compared to their female colleagues ($t = 3.375$; $p < 0.001$).

3.3.2. D2 Methodology

In Dimension 2: Methodology (Table 8), more than 75% of respondents reported feeling capable of adapting their teaching to student diversity through the development of methodological strategies, resources, materials, communication and evaluation techniques, and assessment practices.

This dimension (D2) shows a particularly positive association with the variables "experience with people with ASD" (Table 9), "teaching specialization" ($F = 36.365$; $p < 0.001$) and "motivation for teaching" ($F = 23.336$; $p < 0.001$). Participants who reported positive experiences with individuals on the autism spectrum felt significantly more prepared ($p < 0.001$).

The most competent group in this domain were specialists in attention to diversity (SDI), who reported feeling significantly more prepared than teachers of CSE and SLT ($p < 0.001$), PET and ECPE ($p < 0.001$), and ECET ($p = 0.001$). Additionally, leadership team

members (SLT) and Educational Guidance Specialists (EGS) reported feeling significantly better prepared than Secondary teachers ($p < 0.001$), while Secondary teachers (CSET) felt less competent than those in Early Childhood and Primary Education ($p < 0.001$ in all comparisons).

Regarding "motivation for teaching" ($F = 23.336$; $p < 0.001$), there were statistically significant differences between teachers who entered the profession out of vocation and all other groups ($p < 0.001$). As for "educational stage" ($F = 19.227$; $p < 0001$) and "training hours" ($F = 16.388$; $p < 0.001$) Early Childhood and Primary teachers reported feeling better prepared than those in Secondary Education, Baccalaureate, and Vocational Training ($p < 0.001$). Teachers in CBE also felt better prepared than those in Vocational Training ($p = 0.012$) and Baccalaureate ($p = 0.015$), while teachers in Transition to Adult Life (TAL) expressed greater preparedness than those in Baccalaureate, Vocational Training ($p = 0.001$), and Secondary Education ($p = 0.005$). Notably, teachers with only 0–10 or 11–30 h of training reported significantly lower levels of preparedness compared to groups with more extensive training (significance values ranged from $p < 0.001$ to $p = 0.007$ depending on the comparison).

Furthermore, respondents with "experience in non-formal educational contexts involving vulnerable individuals" ($t = 8.605$; $p < 0.001$), those who received training provided by "public administrations" ($t = 7.775$; $p < 0.001$), and teachers with more "years of experience" ($F = 6.930$; $p < 0.001$) reported feeling more methodologically competent. Those with 16–25 years, more than 25 years, and 11–15 years of teaching experience felt better prepared compared to those with less than 5 years ($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.002$; $p = 0.034$) and those with 5–10 years of experience ($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$; $p = 0.034$).

Finally, statistically significant results were also observed in the variables of "close and habitual contact with vulnerable people" ($t = 5.760$; $p < 0.001$) and "gender" ($t = -5.508$ $p < 0.001$), with female participants reporting greater perceived preparedness in this area.

3.3.3. D3 Supports

Regarding Dimension 3 (Table 8), which addresses the concept of support, the role that support teachers should assume, the potential recipients of that support, and the context in which it is provided, the sample showed a strong tendency to agree with the inclusive approaches presented ($M = 2.72.16$; $SD = 0.3694$). Notably, 92.7% of respondents agreed that "Joint planning between the classroom teacher and the support teacher facilitates inclusion" and 77.8% believed that "Support teachers should be present in the mainstream classroom alongside each classroom teacher".

The variable of "prior experience with individuals with ASD" (Table 9) emerged as the most significant ($F = 25.397$; $p < 0.001$), with more favorable views on inclusive support found among teachers who had either positive experiences or no prior experience, compared to those who had negative experiences ($p < 0.001$ in both comparisons).

Regarding "teaching specialization" ($F = 10.030$; $p < 0.001$), secondary school teachers (CSET) demonstrated a less inclusive perspective on support compared to Early Childhood Education tutors (ECET) ($p < 0.001$), Primary Education tutors (PET) ($p = 0.029$), ECPE specialists ($p = 0.006$), and compared to school leadership teams (SLT), diversity specialists (SDI), and educational guidance specialists (EGS) ($p < 0.001$ in all cases). Furthermore, school leadership (SLT) reported a more inclusive view than PET ($p = 0.043$), and EGSs expressed more inclusive views than PET ($p < 0.001$), SDI ($p < 0.001$), and ECPE ($p = 0.012$) teachers.

Significant differences were also observed across "educational stages" ($F = 4.677$; $p < 0.001$), with Early Childhood, Primary Education, and Vocational Training teachers showing more inclusive perspectives on support compared to those in Secondary Education

($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$; and $p = 0.005$) and Baccalaureate ($p < 0.001$; $p = 0.001$; and $p = 0.002$). In line with Table 10, regarding "type of school" (F = 3.835; $p = 0.009$), teachers from special education schools expressed greater agreement with inclusive support approaches than those from mainstream schools with special education classrooms ($p = 0.001$) and mainstream schools ($p = 0.007$). Teachers trained through "public administration" courses also achieved significantly higher scores (t = 3.146; $p = 0.002$).

In addition, greater agreement with inclusive support practices was reported by teachers "motivated by vocation" (F = 2.741; $p = 0.027$) and those with more "training hours" (F = 2.699; $p = 0.006$); participants with only 0–10 or 11–30 h of training showed a less inclusive view of support compared to those with 61–100 h ($p < 0.001$ and $p = 0.025$) and 31–60 h ($p = 0.007$).

Lastly, the perception of inclusive support was also significantly influenced by "experience in non-formal education settings" (t = 2.550; $p = 0.011$), lack of "close and regular contact with vulnerable individuals" (t = −2.538; $p = 0.011$), and "gender", with women reporting significantly more inclusive views (t = −2.193; $p = 0.028$).

3.3.4. D4 Community Participation

In Dimension 4 (Table 8), which includes perspectives on collaborative work between the school and community stakeholders, as well as the utilization of local resources, the responses from the sample indicate a strong agreement on the importance of this dimension as a key component of inclusive education.

With respect to the variable of "school ownership" (F = 4.255; $p = 0.014$), the results show that public schools teachers share these premises significantly more positively than teachers in state-subsidized schools ($p = 0.005$).

Findings related to the "type of school" (Table 10) reveal a higher level of agreement with the principles of community participation among teachers from mainstream schools and mainstream schools with special education classrooms, compared to those from special education schools ($p = 0.003$; $p = 0.039$). And, regarding "teaching specialization" (F = 2.629; $p = 0.015$), educational guidance specialists (EGS) expressed the most favorable views toward participation and collaborative work, compared to secondary school teachers (CSET) ($p = 0.001$), early childhood and primary education specialists (ECPE) ($p = 0.023$), school leadership teams (SLT) ($p = 0.024$), and early childhood tutors (ECET) ($p = 0.041$).

Finally, "age" (F = 2.723; $p = 0.028$) and "experience in non-formal teaching" (t = 2.584; $p = 0.010$) were again significant variables, aged 26 to 30 reporting significantly greater agreement with the principles of community collaboration than those aged 51 or older ($p = 0.003$) and those aged 41 to 50 ($p = 0.007$).

4. Discussion

The results of this study show that, overall, non-university teachers in Spain hold a predominantly positive attitude toward the educational inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream schools. However, this position is not homogeneous, as it depends on various factors such as previous experience with individuals with ASD, the training received, teaching specialty, motivation towards teaching, the core characteristics of the students, and the type of school in which they work. Consequently, the level of commitment to inclusive education and the perceived benefits of inclusion vary according to these and other contextual elements. As highlighted in previous literature, inclusive education is generally perceived as a beneficial principle for the school community (Booth et al., 2015; Echeita Sarrionandía & Ainscow, 2011), yet its effective implementation depends on structural, formative, and attitudinal factors (Rattaz et al., 2020).

Thus, the findings of this investigation reinforce this notion by emphasizing the key role that teacher training and direct experience with people play in the genesis of inclusive attitudes and values (Allport, 1977; Vera Noriega et al., 2002). These attitudes correlate with the level of training received (Abulhamail et al., 2014) and the quality of interpersonal contact. As Allport (1977) argued, not all contact between groups promotes attitudinal change; its nature matters and determines the rejection of the vulnerable group or social acceptance. This highlights the need to foster positive contact experiences in inclusive school environments. In fact, variables such as close contact with vulnerable individuals and experience in informal training contexts emerged as significant variables across both instruments and their dimensions.

Linked to these attitudes and their construction, significant generational differences appear, with younger teachers being the ones who seem to show a greater willingness towards the inclusion of students with ASD in ordinary schools. This data can be explained from a social and historical perspective; the normalization of ASD in school environments, the social visibility of neurodiversity and the formal incorporation of the inclusive paradigm in the teaching plans of recent decades have been contributing to a cultural change through training and positive contact (Márquez Ordoñez, 2021; Zambrano-Garcés & Orellana-Zambrano, 2018). Therefore, Positive experience with individuals with ASD emerges in this study as a key factor, in line with previous research (Larcombe et al., 2019; Lisak Šegota et al., 2020; Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023) which has demonstrated how direct exposure to diversity contributes to reducing prejudice and strengthens teacher' confidence in managing inclusion. These results underscore the importance of fostering positive, early interactions with people with ASD, especially during initial teacher training (Arias-Pastor et al., 2023), ensuring these interactions do not lead to the exclusion of more vulnerable students (Allport, 1977). Indeed, positive contact in this study correlates with teachers who report feeling more competent and better prepared.

Moreover, teaching specialization also appears as relevant variable. Teachers specialized in educational guidance (EGS) and in diversity and inclusion (SDI) show more favorable attitudes toward inclusion, in contrast with teachers in Early Childhood and Primary Education, and especially with those teaching in secondary education (CSET). Baccalaureate and Vocational Training stages are less inclusive despite often a profile of students with lower level of need for support (Level 1) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022); this suggests that training in inclusive education, and specifically in meeting the needs of students with ASD and other diverse learners, has a direct impact on perceptions of inclusion, an aspect that has already been pointed out in much of the previous research (Dalamitrou, 2024; González de Rivera Romero et al., 2022; Jodra-Chuan, 2024; Lisak Šegota et al., 2020; Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2022) and which should be incorporated into the educational policy development.

These findings are highly significant, since the role of teachers specialized in TP and HL (Specialists in Diversity and Inclusion) are gradually being redefined towards the development of a profile that drives institutional transformation and change towards the real inclusion (Cole, 2005; Florian, 2014a; Sandoval Mena et al., 2012). The results show that these teachers, with the specialist in educational guidance, have a greater perception of competence, have been able to internalize the UDL approach and present better attitudes towards collaboration and teaching co-responsibility. However, these results are not linked to evidence-based practice, and the insufficient number of professionals—as well as the continued tension between a clinical and a social model—hinders their work as agents of change. It is necessary to review the organizational and cultural model of each primary and secondary school (Román Meléndez et al., 2021) as well as the form to provision of HL and TP, which are currently determined by the number of diagnostic labels among

students, reflecting an integration-era logic rather than the design of a school for all without exception (Márquez Ordóñez, 2024).

The study also reveals that most teachers feel capable of adjusting instruction to student diversity using methodological inclusive strategies, communication techniques and evaluation practices. However, perceived competence varies according to specialization and training. Teachers specializing in attention to diversity (HL and TP) and educational guidance report feeling more competent of implementing inclusive strategies, while secondary, Baccalaureate and Vocational Training teachers perceive themselves as less qualified. These findings have already been exposed in previous studies (Boix, 2008; Rodríguez Macayo et al., 2020), which highlight that secondary teachers often enter the profession with limited knowledge about inclusion and its critical success factors, such as inclusive methodologies and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Alba Pastor, 2018). These results further support the ongoing need to strengthen both initial and in-service inclusive training across all educational stages, regardless of teaching specialty, recognizing this as foundational knowledge for all educators, especially in secondary education, where methodological diversification is less common (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017).

Teacher training, particularly the number of hours and the type of instruction, emerges as one of the most significant variables in this study. In both the INTEA-EDG and CEFI-R instruments, participants who had received more extensive training in inclusion and ASD reported more favorable perceptions of inclusive education and its practices. They also felt more prepared to apply inclusive methodologies. Teachers who had received between 30 and 60 h of training were significantly more positive and confident than those who had received less. These results are consistent with other studies showing that robust initial and continuous training enhances teachers' confidence and self-efficacy when implementing inclusive strategies (Abulhamail et al., 2014; Gómez-Marí et al., 2022a; Lisak Šegota et al., 2020; Pegalajar Palomino & Colmenero Ruiz, 2017; Samadi & McConkey, 2018; Vélez et al., 2022), with those receiving between 60 and 200 h reporting the highest preparedness.

Regarding teacher motivation, those who chose the profession out of vocation exhibit more favorable attitudes than those who entered for job stability or lack of alternatives. This finding aligns with other studies (González-Gil et al., 2017; Jury et al., 2021) that identify intrinsic motivation as a key predictor of commitment to inclusive education and its core values. Vocational teachers in this investigation also reported feeling more confident in their ability to implement inclusive practices. Lastly, teaching experience over 15 years and being female were variables associated with significant more favorable attitudes toward inclusive education (Garzón Castro et al., 2016; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2020), though these findings are debated in other studies (Chiner, 2011; Gómez-Marí et al., 2022b). In this study, both variables also influenced teachers' perceptions of their ability to develop inclusive responses and their adherence to inclusive supports strategies.

Additionally, the majority of participants highly value co-planning between general and support teachers and collaboration with the school community. However, barriers remain in teachers' perceptions of inclusive support. While most agree that support teachers should work within the mainstream classroom, secondary and baccalaureate teachers hold more negative views of this matter, implicitly favoring pull-out models still a dominant practice and one of the major "shadows" in these educational stages (Martínez Domínguez, 2011).

Interestingly, teachers in special education schools showed a greater predisposition toward co-planning and teacher collaboration compared to those in mainstream schools. This finding suggests that, while special education continues to be viewed as a segregated option (UNESCO, 2020a), these schools often foster a stronger culture of teamwork, which is essential to developing inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2014b). Prior research has also shown that although special education teachers may hold more negative attitudes toward inclusion

of the most vulnerable students, they also show more positive attitudes toward these students compared to generalist mainstream schools (Jury et al., 2021). It is worth noting that these "special" teachers in this study were less open to participation and community engagement, underscoring the importance, as Ferrer Añón and Monserrat Vaello (2021) suggests, of "the creation of channels for teacher participation and collaboration", and viewing attention to diversity as a systemic responsibility of the entire education system.

Finally, it is important to highlight that educational guidance specialists (EGS) are the most open to teamwork and community collaboration, reinforcing their essential role in coordinating and developing inclusive strategies and in driving cultural transformation within educational institutions (Sandoval Mena et al., 2019) been necessary a greater presence of these professionals to achieve educational and social objectives (Harris, 2013).

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study provide a broad and nuanced understanding of the perceptions of non-university Spanish teachers regarding the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in mainstream schools, identifying key modulating variables that influence their attitudes and practices. The key factors are specific training, experiences and previous positive contact, collaborative culture and professional specialization.

Overall, the teaching staff shows predominantly positive attitudes toward inclusive education as the most appropriate model for addressing the needs of students with ASD. However, such attitudes are not homogeneous and vary depending on several interrelated factors making it necessary to move from inclusion in discourse to the practice of systematic and sustained inclusion through the adjustment of regulations, professional roles, and school cultures.

Significant differences were identified based on prior experience with individuals with ASD, motivation for teaching, level and type of training, teaching specialization, educational stage, and the perceived support needs of students. These findings reflect the influence of both structural and attitudinal variables on inclusive practices.

Teachers who had positive experiences with individuals with ASD, vocational motivation, and extensive training showed more favorable attitudes and greater self-efficacy for implementing inclusive strategies. This suggests a link between commitment to professional development and alignment with inclusive practices.

Specialists in educational guidance (EGS) and diversity and inclusion (SDI), along with teachers in Early Childhood and Primary Education, exhibited significantly more inclusive attitudes compared to those teaching in Secondary Education, Baccalaureate, and Vocational Training. This gap reinforces the need to reformulate the normative and organizational frameworks so as not to limit inclusion at higher levels and to promote the extension of conditions already created in the early stages (Early Childhood and Primary) to stages such as Secondary, Baccalaureate and Vocational Training. Moreover, the distribution of students with ASD across stages was uneven: Secondary stages tended to concentrate on more students with lower levels of perceived need (Level 1), while Early Childhood and Primary stages had a higher presence of students perceived as requiring more support (Levels 2 and 3). These perceptions shaped teacher attitudes, which were more restrictive when students presented more intensive support needs, evidencing persistent attitudinal barriers.

Within the dimensions assessed by the CEFI-R, conceptions of diversity, methodology, and community participation emerged as the strongest. However, inclusive support remains an area of challenge, particularly regarding the presence and role of support teachers in general classrooms, despite strong teacher support (over 90%) for collaborative planning between general and support teachers.

In conclusion, the results show that when training is continuous, specialized, and grounded in real contexts, teachers feel more confident in developing inclusive practices. Therefore, the results underscore the need to strengthen initial and continuous teacher training in inclusive education, UDL, and collaborative work, as well as to promote early positive contact with students with ASD and foster collaborative cultures within schools. These steps are essential for consolidating a genuinely inclusive educational system capable of equitably addressing the diversity of all learners, especially those with ASD.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was self-selected and based on voluntary survey responses, which may limit representativeness and introduce bias. Second, future analyses will incorporate effect size measures and corrections for potential type I error inflation. Including family perspectives and broader school contexts would further enrich the findings.

Future research should explore subgroup differences by educational stage and other contextual factors to better understand how inclusive practices function across diverse school settings. Incorporating the perspectives of families and support organizations could further enrich the evidence base and inform practical, socially grounded improvements in inclusive education for students with ASD. Based on the findings, the following future directions are proposed:

- Strengthen teacher training, especially in the secondary education stage, by deepening both initial and in-service programs on ASD and inclusive education, focusing on inclusive pedagogy, UDL and differentiated instruction, and collaborative support strategies (Alba Pastor, 2018; Jury et al., 2021; Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2023; Pegalajar Palomino & Colmenero Ruiz, 2017; Vélez et al., 2022; Waddington & Reed, 2017).
- Facilitate early contact with individuals with ASD during teacher education to reduce bias and improve attitudes. Service-learning experiences in Spanish universities have shown promise in this area (Maravé-Vivas et al., 2022).
- Challenge deficit-based perceptions among all educators, emphasizing the capacity of every student to learn and thrive in inclusive settings (UNESCO, 2020b).
- Foster inclusive culture and community engagement across all school types, ensuring that in-class support models are effective at all stages, and promote collaborating with special education teachers as valuable resources in the process of transformation (Rojas Pernia & Olmos Rueda, 2016).
- Reinforce the importance of teaching vocation, incorporating reflective and humanistic approaches in teacher education to foster positive attitudes toward diversity (Cobo Beltrán & Torres Cañizalez, 2021).
- Foster collaboration between schools, especially between mainstream and special schools, promoting inclusive values through an ecological equity framework (Ainscow et al., 2013).
- Support intergenerational collaboration by combining the positive attitudes of younger teachers with the expertise of more experienced staff in inclusive-oriented training and institutional projects. Ensure thoughtful selection of schools and mentors during student teaching placements based on evidence-based inclusion criteria (Durán & Giné, 2017; Muñoz Martínez et al., 2021; Serrate González et al., 2016).
- Encourage teamwork among teachers, guidance specialists, and the broader school community, building an inclusive pedagogy that addresses the needs of all students without exception (Giné et al., 2020; Gutiérrez Arias, 2020).
- Guide the functions of specialists in HL and TP as an important part of the teacher teams, incorporating preventive roles, support for the professional development of

other teachers, the detection of barriers to learning and the advice on contextualized didactic proposals (Márquez Ordóñez, 2024).
- Redesign the model for the distribution of specialized support and educational guidance (American School Counselor Association, 2012; Harris, 2013).
- Involve families in the planning and evaluation of inclusive measures by recognizing their knowledge as a valuable pedagogical resource and ensuring equal access to educational resources (Lilley, 2015: Morgan & Stahmer, 2021; Spanish Centre on Autism Spectrum Disorder, 2024).

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