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Diversity of Students and Their Needs: What do Teachers Face in Their Professional Development?

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Abstract: In recent decades, the work of teachers has been carried out in classrooms characterised by a high degree of diversity, necessitating the provision of pedagogical responses that promote the inclusion of students. This article is derived from the research, development and innovation (R+D+I) project 'Intergenerational Professional Development in Education Implications for the Professional Initiation of Teachers (DePrInED)' and aims to analyse how teachers at compulsory education recognise, characterise and conceptualise the diversity and needs of students. A mixed methodological approach was employed, with information collected through focus groups and interviews with a total sample of 147 teachers from different educational levels (young, senior and retired). Thematic analysis, combined with a comparative analysis, was employed to analyse the data using ATLAS.ti software. The main categories analysed dealt with students' needs and their own diversity. The study's primary findings suggest that, in comparison to their retired counterparts, both young and veteran teachers make greater reference to the diversity and needs of students, and emphasise the scarcity of resources and support to effectively address the diversity of students in the classroom. Experienced teachers are found to make more frequent references to diversity and students' needs, while retired teachers make these references less often. This finding assumes particular significance in light of the paucity of studies that adopt a generational perspective to analyse how teachers perceive diversity.

Keywords: Educational needs, diversity, equity, inclusive education, teacher professional development.

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Introduction

It is an irrefutable fact that pedagogical endeavours are undertaken in environments characterised by a high level of diversity, and this growing diversity in the classroom necessitates educational responses that encompass not only the provision of a diverse, sustainable and globalised curriculum or resources to address it, but also teachers who consciously seek and promote diversity in learning experiences (Ragoonaden et al., 2015). The role of teachers in fostering inclusive schools has been extensively researched (Echeita, 2006; Lawrie et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2020). The present study aims to explore how non-university education teachers recognise the diversity of their students, how they conceptualise it, and how they deal with it in accordance with their discourses on the teaching role.

Student Diversity and the Role of the Teacher

The strategic priorities of the 2030 Agenda delineate the principal global challenges that citizens must confront in order to address social, economic, and ecological issues, thereby establishing a more just, supportive, and equitable society (Dieste et al., 2019). Among these challenges, materialised as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is SDG 4, which encompasses the objective of ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as well as the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations [UN], 2015). The educational processes developed in formal education must be based on the belief that education is a basic human right for a more just and equitable society. In this context, the teaching work of teachers will be a key aspect for its development (Dieste et al., 2019; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

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Indeed, the enhancement of educational processes should be conceptualised as the eradication of processes of exclusion in education (related to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, performance and disability) that are a consequence of the attitudes and responses to diversity that are found in classrooms (Messiou et al., 2016). A significant challenge confronting educators is their initial and ongoing preparation to address the challenges of educational equity, quality and inclusion in an information society characterised by inequality, change, uncertainty and increasing complexity (Navarro et al., 2021). This necessitates an approach to student diversity that recognises it not as an impediment, but as a catalyst for positive change (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2020). The Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) asserts that inclusive education is a universal aspiration and underscores the imperative to acknowledge the diversity inherent in gender, age, geographical location, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, linguistic diversity, religious affiliation, migrant or displaced status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, incarceration, and beliefs and attitudes.

Consequently, there is a necessity for teacher training to concentrate on equipping educators with the skills to effectively address diversity and provide support to newly arrived students, catering to the distinct requirements of all students, while fostering tolerance, respect for diversity, and civic responsibility within the educational environment (European Commission, 2017). In this regard, the role of the university is pivotal, as it has recently been compelled to equip teachers with the theoretical underpinnings to conceptualise diversity and categories that facilitate the differentiation of individuals (Arnáiz-Sánchez et al., 2021). In essence, educators bear the responsibility to discern differences and provide opportunities that ensure the efficacy of pedagogical practices for all students (Messiou et al., 2016). It is therefore vital to acknowledge that fostering an inclusive environment and perspective is contingent on recognising and appreciating diversity and human differences (Paz-Delgado & Estrada-Escoto, 2017).

In addition to the training of teachers, a number of studies have indicated that educators' ideas, beliefs and attitudes can also act as facilitators or barriers to the treatment of diversity, as well as the practices and operating patterns of schools (Ahmed et al., 2014; González Barea et al., 2024; González-Gil et al., 2016; Torres & Fernández Batanero, 2015). Despite concerted efforts to identify the variables influencing teachers' recognition, perspective and role in diversity and educational inclusion (Chiner, 2011; Colmenero et al., 2019; García-Candel et al., 2024), the findings regarding the influence of teachers' gender, age, and their status as either practicing professionals or in training have been inconclusive. Research has indicated that specialists in special education hold more favourable attitudes towards inclusion in comparison to generalist teachers (Chiner, 2011; González-Gil et al., 2016; Guillemot et al., 2022; Lledó Carreres & Arnáiz Sánchez, 2016).

The extant literature indicates that working with "diverse learners" is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, and that addressing this challenge effectively necessitates the presence of several key components (Rowan et al., 2021). Primarily, educators must cultivate a profound comprehension of the manifold forms of diversity that manifest within the classroom environment. It is imperative to acknowledge that these diversities mirror the intricate tapestry of the broader social and cultural demographics of the population. This profound understanding is indispensable for ensuring equitable access to education, enhancing the learning experience, and optimizing educational outcomes for all students. Secondly, educators must adopt a flexible approach to teaching, allowing them to adapt their methods to meet the diverse needs of students. Finally, educators must conceptualize diversity not merely as an element to be managed, but rather as a vital and integral component of the educational process. This entails the creation of learning environments that not only accept but also celebrate and value diversity.

In consideration of the aforementioned concepts, the present article seeks to analyse and reflect upon the manner in which compulsory education teachers recognise, conceptualise, and address the diversity and needs of their students. It is imperative to acknowledge that this study was conducted within the framework of the R&D&I project entitled 'Intergenerational Professional Development in Education: Implications for the Professional Initiation of Teachers' (DePrInEd), whose objectives were to characterise teachers generationally and identify their professional relationships. The research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows: To what extent does the generational perspective of non-university educators, in conjunction with the educational level at which they function, influence their recognition of student diversity and needs? Furthermore, the study will explore how these educators characterise and conceptualise student diversity and the needs associated with it. In this regard, the factors that, from the educators' perspective, influence the manner in which diversity is addressed in the classroom will be investigated. The objective of these inquiries is to elucidate the intricate interplay between educators' generational perspectives, their educational settings, and their methodologies concerning student diversity and its requisites.

Researching teachers' perspectives on students' needs and diversity is crucial because it allows teaching methods to be adapted so that all students can reach their full potential (Semião et al., 2023). Diversity in the classroom has been shown to enrich the teaching and learning process by encouraging critical thinking and problem solving (Semião et al., 2023). Moreover, inclusive and equitable education is pivotal in ensuring that all students have access to quality education, which is fundamental to nurturing a fairer and more tolerant society from a generational perspective (Brown, 2021). From a generational perspective, it is imperative to understand the perceptions of teachers regarding the needs and diversity of students. The insights of more seasoned educators can offer invaluable wisdom and practical experiences, while the innovative approaches and technologies of their younger counterparts can introduce novel

methodologies. A comprehensive understanding of how these two groups of teachers perceive and adapt to educational changes can inform the development of more effective training and support strategies. Fostering intergenerational relationships within the teaching profession can significantly enhance cohesion and collaboration in schools, benefiting both teachers and students.

The objectives of this study are as follows: Firstly, the influence of the generational perspectives of non-university teachers and their educational level of employment on their recognition of student diversity and needs will be examined. Secondly, the characterisation and conceptualisation of student diversity and related needs by non-university teachers will be identified and analysed. Finally, the interrelationship between teachers' generational perspectives, their educational contexts, and their methodological approaches to student diversity and needs will be explored.

Methodology

Research Design

The research presented here constituted a component of a larger research project that employed a mixed methodology, incorporating qualitative and quantitative components (Semião et al., 2023). The project was comprised of two sequential phases or studies; the study under consideration formed the initial phase of the project. The design of the first study was characterised as exploratory and qualitative, and focused on generational diversity, using semi-structured focus groups as data collection instruments (Brown, 2021). The complete development of the methodology employed in the project can be found in Portela Pruaño et al. (2022).

Sample and Data Collection

A purposive and convenience sample was employed for the recruitment of participants, with a variant of snowball sampling (Emmel, 2013) being utilised through the personal and social networks of the researchers, the Spanish national union and various associations of retired teachers. The sample comprised 147 teachers ($n = 147$) from public schools at various levels, including pre-school, primary, secondary, and vocational education. The primary criteria for differentiating and grouping the participants were age and teaching experience. The inclusion criteria for the study are detailed in Table 1. To ensure a balanced representation of the work and educational stages, 20 teachers were selected from each stage of working life and 15 from each educational stage, resulting in a total sample of 60 teachers from various regions of Spain. The analysis focuses on generational groups, excluding the analysis of the influence of 'professional culture' on professional groups.

The data presented in this article were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were deemed the most suitable method for exploring the perceptions and professional attitudes of the participants in detail, as they were able to offer their personal perspectives on the phenomena based on their experience (Horton et al., 2004; Patton, 2005). This technique was applied in accordance with the protocol and guidelines established by the research team. Due to the global nature of the interviews, they were conducted via videoconference. The key questions were derived from the first sub-study (i.e. the participants' vision of the teaching profession and teaching, their perception of professional relationships, and the differences and similarities between generations) and were complemented with clarifying questions when it was necessary to go into more depth or clarify a specific aspect. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed literally and in full.

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria

	Young Beginning Teachers (YBT)	Mature Veteran Teachers (MVT)	Older Retired Teachers (ORT)
Age and teaching experience	Aged 30 and younger (born after 1990) with teaching experience of 6 school years or less.	Aged 50 and over and teaching experience of 10 school years or more	Aged 60 and over (either by compulsory retirement or by voluntary retirement).
Grade level	Early childhood education (2nd level), Primary education		
Type of school	Publicly-funded schools		

Table 2 presents the participants' characteristics in terms of age and years of experience by generational group. It also includes the stage at which they teach, this makes it easier for us to differentiate between discourses in the analysis.

Table 2. Characteristics of Participants

	YBT (n=51)		MVT (n=50)		ORT (n=46)			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Age	28	1.9	56.6	2.9	66.9	4.6		
Teaching Experienced	2.8	2	27.6	6.5	35.7	6.2		
	YBT		MVT		ORT		Full sample	
	n	%	n	%	N	%	n	%
School stage								
Elementary	27	52.9	24	48	23	50	74	50.3
Secondary	24	47.1	26	52	23	50	73	49.7
Gender								
Female	37	72.5	38	76	23	50	98	66.7
Male	14	27.5	12	24	23	50	49	33.3

a Years of age counted as at 31 December 2021.

b Years of experience counted when responding to the initial electronic questionnaire.

c This category includes early childhood education (2nd cycle) and primary education.

Analyzing of Data

The analysis of the data collected through the focus groups was carried out through a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020), combined with a constant comparative analysis, which also provides this reflexive character (Tracy, 2020). The model proposed by Braun and Clarke was utilised, employing a series of phases in a sequential manner: Initially, an initial familiarisation analysis was conducted, in which team members took notes and familiarised themselves with the data. This was followed by the generation of a codebook, which involved the segmentation of significant data and the assignment of codes with their definitions and examples. This process combined data-based and theoretical analysis. Subsequently, topics of interest were identified, and patterns of relationship between the data and the research questions were searched for, using central categories that organised clusters of codes. The emerging topics were then reviewed and confronted with the data to confirm, correct, or reject the central categories. Finally, each topic was named and delimited, connecting them to each other and generating definitions accompanied by illustrative quotes to facilitate understanding. For the qualitative analysis of the data, the ATLAS.ti software, version 22, was employed.

Findings/Results

During the search and topic generation phase of the research project (generational diversity in professional relationships), two potential codes were identified for review: needs and diversity of the student body. These codes were used when participants referred to students in their discourse. In the context of pedagogical practice, two distinct codes, 1.01.04_Needs and 1.01.03_Diversity, were utilised to denote specific student needs or characteristics. The former was employed when educators identified discernible needs within individual students or groups of students, while the latter was used to acknowledge significant variations or diversities among students. In both scenarios, the utilisation of these codes served to differentiate students from the standard or archetypal student profile as perceived by the educator.

The ensuing results are organised in two sections. The initial section delineates the two codes selected for analysis in terms of their prevalence in teachers' discourse, their sentiments regarding these two codes, and the themes associated with them. The second section employs an approach to the content of the discourse of the codes that allows us to analyse what teachers say about the needs and diversity of the student body.

Prevalence in Discourse: Which Teachers Talk About Students' Needs and Diversity and How do They Perceive Them?

Firstly, the prevalence or frequency of each category on which the analysis is focused is presented. This is achieved by analysing each code with the generational groups of documents (i.e. the documents created from the interviews with the subjects in the sample) and with the groups of documents according to the educational stage of the teachers. The ATLAS.ti algorithm is then utilised to ascertain the prevailing sentiment within the discourse, whilst simultaneously investigating the teachers' perception of it.

As illustrated in Table 3, the ATLAS.ti code-document table elucidates the relationship between the two analytical codes and the generational cohorts. A preliminary analysis suggests marked differences in discourse frequency between the cohorts.

Table 3. Code-Document Relationship Table. Career Stage

	Young beginning teachers (YBT)		Mature veteran teachers (MVT)		Older retired teachers (ORT)		Totals
	Frequency type						Absol ute
	Absolute	Row- relative	Absolute	Row- relative	Absolute	Row- relative	
1.01_About_Students: 1.01.03_Diversity	53	34%	66	42,3%	37	23,7%	156
1.01_About_Students: 1.01.04_Needs	94	36,7%	89	34,8%	73	28,5%	256
Totals	147	35,7%	155	37,6%	110	26,7%	412

Note. the following table has been extracted from ATLAS.ti software. The table displays the total count of citations for a given code in a particular group of documents referring to the teachers' experience (absolute) and its frequency with respect to the other groups (Row).

It is evident that retired teachers participate less frequently in discourse. Retired teachers demonstrate a lower frequency than their colleagues when discussing both diversity (23.7%) and the needs (28.5%) of students. While both novice and veteran teachers demonstrate comparable prevalence in their discourse, it is noteworthy that veteran teachers exhibit a higher frequency in their discussions on student diversity (42.3%).

Conversely, an analysis of the column frequency reveals that the prevalence of each code within each group of teachers is indicative of a greater recognition of students' needs by teachers than of their diversity. The YBT category dedicates 63.9% of its quotes to needs, while the MVT category dedicates 57.4% of its quotes to needs. The ORT category dedicates 66.4% of its quotes to students' needs, indicating that teachers, in general, refer mostly in their discourse to the needs that students may have in view of their diversity.

Table 4 compares two codes of interest: diversity and needs. It also examines teachers' document groups based on their educational stage, whether elementary or secondary education.

Table 4. Code-Document Relationship Table. Teaching Stages

	Elementary Education		Secondary Education		Totals
	Frequency type				Absolute
	Absolute	Row- relative	Absolute	Row- relative	
1.01_About_Students: 1.01.03_Diversity	57	41,0%	82	59%	139
1.01_About_Students: 1.01.04_Needs	105	43,4%	137	56,6%	242
Totals	162	42,5%	219	57,5%	381

Note. The following table has been extracted from the ATLAS.ti software. It displays the total number of citations for a given code in a specific group of documents pertaining to the teaching stage in which they are found (absolute) and their frequency with respect to the other groups (Row).

A preliminary analysis reveals no significant disparities between the two groups of teachers in either category. Elementary school teachers are the least frequent contributors to both categories of discourse, i.e., discourse on student diversity and discourse on student needs. Conversely, a higher prevalence of discourse pertaining to both diversity (59%) and students' needs (56.6%) is observed among secondary school teachers. This observation may be indicative of a perception among secondary school teachers that diversity and students' needs are of greater significance, or at the very least, that they are accorded greater importance in their respective discourses. One potential correlation between these findings and the educational level of teachers is that secondary school teachers may be more cognizant of the needs of diverse students. This is because historically, students from diverse backgrounds were less represented at this educational level. This phenomenon may also be attributed to a paucity of provisions for diversity at this stage of education.

Furthermore, discourse analysis using the ATLAS.ti software, which detects the sentiment of the discourse (positive, negative, or neutral), has been employed to analyse the emotional responses of the teachers when talking about these two categories. As previously mentioned, the ATLAS.ti algorithm was used to analyse the sentiment in the teachers' discourse and determine how they perceive these issues. As illustrated in Figure 1, the frequency distribution clearly gravitates towards the negative sentiments expressed by teachers. Specifically, in the context of needs, 89.7% of the quotes were negative, while in the context of diversity, 77.5% of the quotes exhibited a negative trend in their discourse.

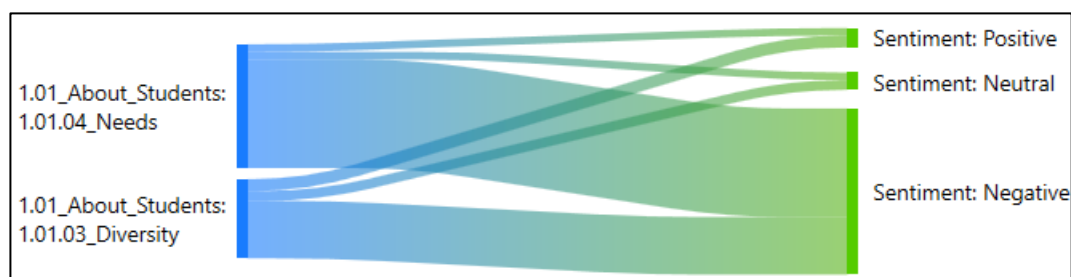


Figure 1. Sankey Diagram[†] of the Relationship Between Categories and Sentiment Codes

Note. Extracted from ATLAS.ti software. Table of code co-occurrence.

Although this analysis should be approached with caution, the results suggest a negative teaching inclination towards these two issues. Traditionally, teachers have perceived these issues as negative. In order to characterise the needs and diversity of learners, an explanation for this phenomenon will be sought in the following section. In this section, the content of the two categories selected for analysis will be investigated.

Within the Teaching Discourse: What Characterises the Needs and Diversity of Learners?

In this analysis, teachers refer to the different core categories in order to highlight the differences between pupils and the needs they have in the classroom on a daily basis. They also emphasise the individual characteristics of the subjects and how teaching responds to these characteristics. It is important to note that this diversity of the student body is not viewed in a negative light, despite the connotations that may be associated with it. The necessity and diversity of subjects is a circumstance in which they find themselves, but which should not lead to exclusion; it is a way of understanding differences. Differences between students are understood as a new educational model that has not been so present in educational institutions until now, a model based on diversity.

In turn, the categories analysed are recurrently linked to others with which they are associated. Using the various concurrency analysis tools available in the software, remarkable relationships were identified between the different categories that emerged during the data analysis. The diversity and needs of students, the categories of interest for this research, have a more or less strong relationship with the other objects of perception that emerged in the analysis. However, three of them stand out in a particular way.

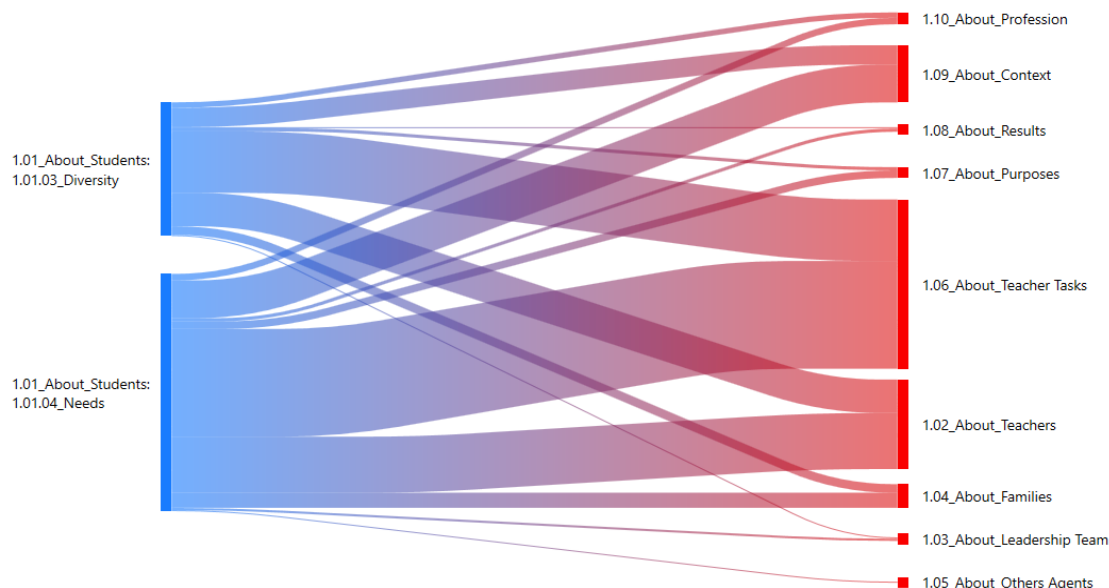


Figure 2. Sankey Diagram of the Relationship between Codes

Note. Extracted from ATLAS.ti software. Table of code co-occurrence.

As illustrated in Figure 3, a semantic network is presented that demonstrates the relationships between the main codes previously described, as well as the sub-codes that are emerging within each of them. The network reveals that, from

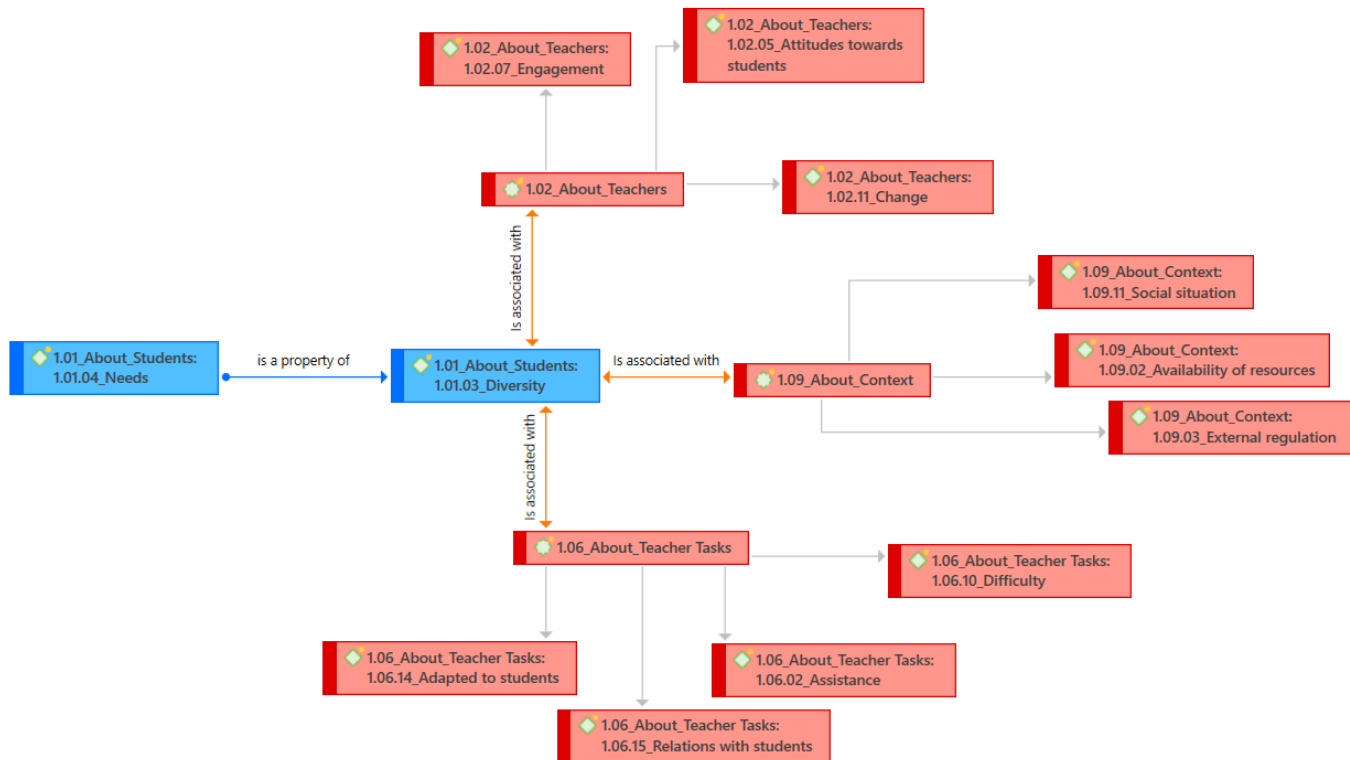
[†] Sankey diagrams are the illustrative tool of the ATLAS.ti software to express the prevalence of each of the categories as a function of a specific variable. In this case, the feeling expressed by the teachers when speaking.

the teachers' perspective, there are several interconnected themes that consistently relate to student diversity and needs, either influencing or being influenced by them.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the semantic network demonstrates the relationship between the aforementioned codes and the sub-codes that have emerged in each. This indicates that teachers encounter numerous themes that are consistently linked and that have an impact on, or are affected by, student diversity and needs.

Figure 3. Semantic Network[‡] of Relationships between Codes

In order to provide further clarification regarding the aforementioned categories and the remarks made by the teachers, the ensuing description outlines the categories in question and the commentary provided by the teaching faculty. Additionally, the present study will demonstrate the relationship between the central categories that have been



explored in this paper and those that emerged from the analysis. However, in the following table (Table 5), a concise definition of each of the codes utilised is provided to facilitate the reader's comprehension.

Table 5. Meanings of the Codes that Emerged in the Analysis

Code: About Teachers. Perceptions of teachers; referring to these teachers.	
Subcodes	Engagement: The participant highlights the motivation, or even involvement and/or commitment of the teacher in the performance of their work and/or professional practice (also the lack of motivation, involvement or commitment).
	Attitudes Towards Students: The participant highlights attitudes or dispositions towards the learner, in whole or in part
	Change: The participant highlights change or even innovation or renewal among teachers (including willingness to change or renew) or lack of change or renewal.
Code: About Context. Perception referring to specific or general external circumstances or conditions, under which the teaching task is carried out.	

[‡] The semantic networks illustrate the relationships found between the different categories of analysis.

Table 5. Continued

Subcodes	Social situation: The participant highlights characteristics of the society as a whole or important parts of it.
	Availability of resources: The participant highlights the general availability of resources or gaps in this regard.
	External regulation: The participant highlights the regulation and its characteristics. He/she may also refer to its shortcomings.
Code: About_Teacher Tasks. Perception of the educational or teaching task: what it is; what teachers do and even how they do it.	
Subcode	Adapted to students: The participant highlights the adaptation or adjustment of teaching to the learner (totally or partially) or deficiencies in this quality.
	Relation with students: The participant stresses the importance of establishing relationships with learners or even certain relationships with learners (or no relationships or certain types of relationships).
	Assistance: The participant emphasises in the teaching task (or at least one of its basic dimensions) helping or supporting the learner, considered in general or partially (or emphasises the lack of this trait).
	Difficulty: The participant highlights the difficulty of the task in general or the problems or difficulties involved in carrying out the task.

In the following sections, educators' insights on various topics relevant to students' needs are explored in depth. Additionally, the importance of fostering diversity is thoroughly examined.

On the Context of Teachers' Attention to Student Diversity

The pedagogical task is influenced by a multitude of factors that educators must address in their professional practice, with the conditions under which the teaching-learning process takes place being of particular significance. The geographical context of the educational establishment exerts a substantial influence on these processes, and consequently, numerous factors may emerge that impede students with specific needs or those requiring customized strategies to address diversity. This issue becomes especially evident in the experiences shared by novice teachers. As articulated by one novice teacher:

"You face a classroom with twenty-five children who don't speak Spanish, and you have to work with them. It is important to note that challenges may arise due to a lack of material resources, an inability to cope, or a shortage of support personnel. [...] You realize that, although they are all the same age, each of them has a different learning process." (D9:39.YBT.In)

In this case, reference is made to the most evident needs that students may manifest in their learning process. Nevertheless, the issue of resources consistently emerges in the discourse of educators. This is attributable to the significant impact it wields on the evolution of their pedagogical practice. Moreover, this predicament frequently emanates from the intricacies of the school environment, thereby influencing the learning milieu. The same teacher further observes that:

"There are centres that are very well equipped in general with everything, be it interactive whiteboards, material for psychomotor skills, material for the classroom, corners, toys, and then there are other centres that do not have that opportunity." (D9:14.YBT.In)

It is unfortunate that measures of segregation and homogenisation are frequently implemented by the administration. A retired teacher has emphasised the necessity of considering contexts in order to implement specific measures of attention, not only for students, but also for schools, as each has its own characteristics.

"It is imperative that the context is given due consideration, particularly with regard to the geographical location of the centre, in order to facilitate the convergence of the entire population and the successful realisation of the objectives. It is essential that the programme, or the centre's plan, aligns with this direction, and that the activities taking place outside the classroom, such as extracurricular and complementary activities, among others, also reflect this commitment". (D53:71.ORT.In)

On the Teacher's Task in the Face of Students' Needs

As previously mentioned, the context is instrumental in the development of teachers' work and students' learning. A significant challenge in providing adequate support to learners with particular needs pertains to the number of

students in the classroom. The majority of teachers attest to the fact that the large number of students in the classroom considerably limits the resources available to cater to the needs of individual students. Teachers who have worked in a variety of contexts have highlighted the significant advantages of reduced class sizes:

“In the case of the rural school, for instance, the number of children in each class was three. Consequently, the level of attention that could be provided was significantly higher. While this may not have resulted in a commensurate increase in the quality of education, the level of attention given to three children was clearly different from that given to twenty-five children.” (D9:37.YBT.In)

It is imperative to acknowledge an additional issue that had been previously mentioned: namely, the scarcity of resources available to educators. The nature of the materials available to teachers had a substantial impact on their pedagogical approaches and the activities they designed for their students. Moreover, numerous teachers articulated a need for support personnel in the classroom to assist with the supervision of students with special educational needs:

“Therefore, in the event of encountering difficulties, it is advantageous to have an individual nearby who can provide assistance.” (D14:5.MVT.In).

“It is evident that certain centres are extremely well equipped, with a plethora of resources at their disposal, including interactive whiteboards, materials to facilitate psychomotor skills, classroom materials, designated corners, and toys. Conversely, there are other centres that lack such opportunities.” (D9:14.YBT.In)

In contrast, the evolution of the teaching task is also noteworthy, as attested by both younger and older teachers. Older teachers emphasise that their pedagogical approach has undergone a substantial transformation. The fundamental purpose of the learning process has undergone significant transformation, as has the demographic profile of the students. It is evident that the necessity to accommodate the diversity of students has precipitated an evolution in the pedagogical practices of teachers.

“The advent of diversity in the classroom has been met with a certain degree of trepidation by these teachers.” (D21:23.YBT.In)

“We have since progressed beyond the era of the 'good students', who were the ones with whom I learnt to manage the most effectively. We are now in an era where we are required to assess by competences and to train competent students. Everything has changed. My methodology, less; the contents, well, I no longer give them much thought either. I think it has been, on my part, an adaptation, a natural evolution.” (D12:30.MVT.In)

On Teachers and their Action in the Face of Diversity and Students' Needs

Finally, it is imperative to underscore the actions of the teaching faculty in relation to these students. On multiple occasions, the involvement exhibited by teachers with their students is emphasised as a pivotal factor in addressing the various circumstances and particularities presented by the students.

The veracity of the matter is such that, in practice, I would not disclose it to you in any great detail. It is imperative to adapt to the prevailing circumstances and to attend to the needs of our students. We must listen to them more than ever, discern their demands and endeavor to proceed in the same direction as they do. (D13:37.YBT.In)

It has been posited that educators should adopt a more proactive approach in addressing the diverse needs of students, a concept that has been previously discussed and which is informed by the prevailing context and the present circumstances of the educational institution. However, it is the responsibility of teachers to proactively address the diverse needs of students. A significant proportion of teachers have articulated the transformative impact of contemporary pedagogical practices on their professional engagement. The transition from conventional classrooms, where students tend to have a uniform profile, to diverse classrooms necessitates that teachers provide reinforcement in order to ensure adequate attention is given to the needs of all students.

“Upon entering a classroom, it is important to recognise that all students will not respond in the same manner, nor will they all learn in the same way. It is essential to acknowledge that each student requires individualised attention in order to facilitate effective learning.” (D9:14.YBT.IN)

“It is vital to emphasise that the attention teachers devote to students with needs, and the attitude they demonstrate towards these needs, are fundamental for the provision of adequate support and the students' development. Teachers must recognise the significance of their role in preparing students for life, as upon leaving school, students will be faced with a world devoid of teacher support.” (D36:54.YBT.FG)

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the generational span of non-university teaching staff does not have a significant impact on the recognition of diversity. However, a divergence in the discourse of teachers across different career stages emerges with regard to the manner in which diversity is addressed, with experienced teachers making more frequent

references to diversity and students' needs, while retired teachers make these references less often. This finding assumes particular significance in light of the paucity of studies that adopt a generational perspective to analyse how teachers perceive diversity. A notable strength of this research is the inclusion of novice teachers, representing those at the inception of their careers, while it might be argued that less attention is paid to teachers in the phase of professional consolidation (Domingo et al., 2019).

However, research has been conducted on the attitudes and inclinations that teachers may have towards diversity and towards the needs of students. These attitudes may be linked to the recognition of diversity, as evidenced by the extant literature, which consistently demonstrates outcomes analogous to those observed in our own research, with particular emphasis on the affirmative attitudes exhibited by novice teachers (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Sari et al., 2009). Guillemot et al. (2022) posit that the decline in positive attitudes among teachers can be attributed to the challenging working conditions they face upon entering the profession. These conditions are linked to a deficiency in knowledge and training in managing diversity, as well as to organisational factors such as classroom ratios, working hours, and a lack of support from special education teachers. Research has also indicated that younger teachers tend to demonstrate a greater interest in technology and innovation, while older teachers are often characterised by attributes such as leadership, loyalty, and experience (Geeraerts et al., 2019). While this is speculative, it is posited that this may influence their adaptation to student diversity, with younger teachers potentially being more receptive to novel methodologies and tools that address the varied and diverse needs of all learners (Geeraerts et al., 2019).

It is also noteworthy that perceptions of diversity vary according to educational stage; secondary school teachers are more likely to emphasise diversity and the needs of their students, while pre-primary and primary school teachers focus less on these issues. A priori, it could be considered that teachers in secondary schools are more aware of diversity and refer more frequently to the needs of their students, but this discrepancy could be attributed to the nature of the teaching context. In secondary education, teachers may be confronted with larger and more heterogeneous groups of students, which renders diversity and individual needs more conspicuous in their daily practice.

Despite the paucity of research in this area, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Domingo et al. (2019), who concluded that teachers of Primary Education tend to be less critical of the reality of educational inclusion compared to teachers of Secondary Education. Similarly, Ayala de la Peña et al. (2023) found that teachers of Secondary Education exhibited a more critical stance on inclusion, frequently identifying more barriers to inclusive education than their counterparts in Pre-Primary and Primary Education.

In contrast, as discussed earlier in this paper, the participants in this study also mentioned the organisational and institutional conditions they faced during their professional careers in educational institutions (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Guillemot et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2009). Specifically, teachers reported that the prevailing institutional conditions were not conducive to effectively addressing student diversity or catering to the needs of individual students. Concerns were expressed by teachers regarding the diversity measures implemented by the Education Administration, which were perceived as both segregating and homogenising. Additionally, the prescribed teacher-to-student ratio was identified as a significant constraint on their ability to meet the individual needs of each student. Teachers further highlighted that the resources and materials available to them influenced how they designed their activities and interacted with students, a finding that is consistent with those of other studies (González-Gil et al., 2016; Vallejo-Ruiz et al., 2019). Finally, teachers emphasised the need for support staff in classrooms to assist in addressing students' specific needs.

Contrary to the findings of preceding studies, the present research explores how teachers of differing generations recognise and address the diversity and needs of students in non-university settings. While earlier studies, including those by Costello and Boyle (2013) and Guillemot et al. (2022), concentrated on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and working conditions, this study employs a generational perspective, demonstrating that both younger and older teachers make more references to student diversity and needs in comparison to retired teachers. The study also highlights the scarcity of resources and support in the classroom, a problem that has been previously identified by González-Gil et al. (2016) and Vallejo-Ruiz et al. (2009). However, the present study goes beyond these earlier investigations by focusing specifically on how these constraints affect the perception and practice of diversity among different generations of teachers.

This study identified a pervasive negative sentiment regarding diversity and the needs of students. However, this negative sentiment was predominantly observed in the context of the school environment. The term 'school environment' refers to the external circumstances or conditions, both specific and general, under which the teaching task is executed. This concept was previously discussed in the preceding paragraph. Teachers' appraisals of their teaching tasks, closely linked to this negative sentiment, were shaped by and completely influenced by the context in which they carried out their profession. Teachers generally interpreted the activities and methodologies used in their classes as being determined by the materials, resources, the number of students, and the number of support teachers available in the school. Furthermore, senior members of the teaching faculty drew parallels with the evolution of pedagogical practices over time, attributing this evolution primarily to changes in the educational system, shifts in student demographics, and the increasing presence of diversity in the classroom.

Nevertheless, an analysis of the teachers' discourses reveals a humanist perspective that recognises the necessity to modify conventional pedagogical practices and the requirement for training to address the diversity of students, in addition to the criticism they level at the institutional barriers they face in order to facilitate their development.

Conclusion

This study reveals that a significant proportion of educational research has focused on teachers' perceptions and training regarding topics such as 'attention to diversity,' 'students' needs,' and 'educational inclusion.' These studies frequently propose guidelines for educational inclusion and assess schools' self-evaluation processes. However, despite these contributions, many of these studies are influenced by social desirability bias, which may affect the responses of the informants. In contrast, this study identifies a notable absence of research exploring teachers' own discourses on these issues. By examining teachers' direct accounts, this research identifies the presence and prevalence of terms related to diversity and inclusion within their professional experiences, highlighting the need for more authentic, discourse-driven insights into the challenges and practices surrounding inclusion in education.

Moreover, the research raises novel issues by analysing how teachers of different generations recognise, characterise, and conceptualise diversity and students' needs at non-university levels. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of a generational perspective in the perception of diversity, revealing that both young and veteran teachers make more references to student diversity and needs compared to retired teachers. The study also emphasises the paucity of resources and support to effectively address diversity in the classroom, underscoring the necessity for ongoing training and intergenerational collaboration to enhance inclusive practices and support for diversity in the educational environment.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the manner in which generational differences or stages of teaching might determine or influence the perception, valuation, and management of student diversity. In a context where the recognition of diversity and students' needs are formulated as educational principles to be addressed, it is imperative to describe and discuss how teachers articulate these concepts in their discourses.

While the concept of diversity is acknowledged by teaching professionals of all generations, there is a marked difference in the extent to which this concept is incorporated into pedagogical practices, with younger and older teachers demonstrating a greater propensity to acknowledge and discuss its implications in their respective professional discourses. Generational differences suggest that younger teachers, being more exposed to contemporary debates about inclusion and technologies, may be more inclined to reflect on student diversity in their educational practice (Marrero Galván et al., 2023). With respect to the stage of education, secondary education teachers demonstrate the highest level of awareness of the diversity of their students, reflecting this in the needs of their students. However, these teachers also report a negative sentiment when discussing these issues, particularly in relation to the organisational and institutional framework for addressing and managing diversity.

A comparison of the results of this study with recent research on the implementation of inclusive models in Spanish schools clearly demonstrates a significant deficit in the quality of attention to diversity and educational inclusion within the education system.

Recommendations

The findings indicate that addressing diversity in the classroom is a particularly salient issue for teachers of all ages. However, it is imperative to raise awareness and sensitise older teachers in order to engender a greater willingness to change towards more inclusive practices. A similar concern is observed for teachers at secondary level, indicating the necessity for further advancement in promoting practices, policies and cultures within schools themselves. These should allow teachers to receive training and adopt approaches and practices that are in line with a diverse educational reality.

It is recommended that teachers encourage active participation by creating an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and motivated to participate, adapting materials and resources to meet the specific needs of each student, and participating in ongoing training programmes that address diversity and special educational needs. The following recommendations are made for policy makers: the development of inclusive policies that promote equity in education, the allocation of adequate resources to support students with special educational needs, the promotion of collaboration between schools, families and communities to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment, and the establishment of evaluation and monitoring systems to ensure that inclusive policies and practices are effectively implemented and that students receive the necessary support for their academic and personal development.

Limitations

While there is some correspondence with related research, the generalisability of the conclusions is limited by the analysis of the data. This analysis is based on the recognition and allusion that teachers make to these topics in their discourse, without having been expressly and directly asked about them. Consequently, it is plausible that numerous

teachers have not alluded to the topic, yet they might have done so if they had been asked. Consequently, it is challenging to generalise results that extend beyond the recognition of diversity.

A further limitation of the study may be self-selection bias in regard to focus group participation, i.e. when individuals who choose to participate possess specific characteristics or interests that do not represent the entire population, resulting in biased outcomes as the opinions and experiences of participants may significantly deviate from those who did not participate. To illustrate this point, consider the case of teachers; those who are more comfortable discussing diversity and students' needs may be more inclined to participate in focus groups, while those with less experience or interest in the topic may abstain. This, in turn, can affect the representativeness and validity of the findings.

Ethics Statements

This research constitutes a component of a project that was authorised by the ethics committee of the University of Murcia. All participants are adults. Prior to completing the questionnaire, they were informed of the objectives of the research and the dissemination of the results anonymously.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authorship Contribution Statement

Torres-Soto: conceptualization, design, data acquisition, drafting manuscript, supervision, final approval, writing, securing funding. Bernárdez-Gómez: design, data acquisition, drafting manuscript, data analysis / interpretation, writing, securing funding. García Hernández: drafting manuscript, design data acquisition, critical revision of manuscript, writing, securing funding. Ares-Ferreirós: design, drafting manuscript, data analysis / interpretation, writing, critical revision of manuscript.

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