

# ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SPECIALIST TEACHERS<sup>1</sup>

## *La organización del apoyo educativo para una escuela inclusiva desde la perspectiva del profesorado especialista*

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**ABSTRACT:** The organization of educational support in schools is closely related to the degree of inclusion pursued in educational practice. The inclusive model of support depends on how it is conceived at the centres. This will have a direct impact on how the specialist teachers (Therapeutic Pedagogy Teacher –Pt– and Hearing and Language Teacher –AL–) perform their roles. The general objective of this study was to analyse the organization of support education in primary and secondary schools as perceived by specialist teachers. Descriptive, non-experimental mixed research was carried out. A questionnaire was used with open and closed questions completed by 23 teachers. The results highlighted the use of spaces differentiated from the mainstream classroom,

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where the actions of the support teacher were often not in line with the general dynamics carried out by the mainstream teachers. It was concluded that coordination and responsibility between support teachers and mainstream classroom teachers were not generally shared in a collaborative manner. The study highlighted an organization of support based on the deficit model, whose corrective and compensatory principles did not allow support to be extended to all regular classrooms and to be more inclusive.

KEYWORDS: inclusive education; support teachers; educational support; mixed study.

RESUMEN: La organización del apoyo educativo en las escuelas guarda una estrecha relación con el grado de inclusión que se persigue en la praxis educativa. El modelo inclusivo de apoyo depende de cómo este se conciba en los centros, lo que repercutirá directamente en cómo el profesorado especialista (profesor de Pedagogía Terapéutica –PT– y de Audición y Lenguaje –AL–) ejerza su rol. El objetivo general de este estudio fue analizar la organización de los apoyos en centros de educación primaria y secundaria desde la percepción del profesorado especialista. Se llevó a cabo una investigación descriptiva, no experimental de carácter mixto. Se utilizó un cuestionario con preguntas abiertas y cerradas que cumplieron 23 docentes. Los resultados destacaron la utilización de espacios diferenciados del aula ordinaria, donde a menudo las acciones del docente de apoyo no se encontraron en consonancia con las dinámicas generales que realizaba el profesorado regular. Se concluye que la coordinación y la responsabilidad entre los docentes de apoyo y del aula regular no eran, generalmente, repartidas de manera colaborativa. El estudio destacó una organización del apoyo anclada en el modelo del déficit, cuyos principios correctivos y compensatorios no permitían extender el apoyo al conjunto de las aulas ordinarias y ser más inclusivos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: educación inclusiva; profesorado de apoyo; apoyo educativo; estudio mixto.

## 1. Introduction

ESTABLISHING SUBSTANTIAL, meaningful, inclusive educational processes that manage to transform the organization of today's educational systems requires identification of any elements that can hinder the presence, participation and learning by all students in mainstream classrooms, and elimination of any such obstacles (Echeita and Ainscow, 2011). These *factors* should be modified to become *facilitators for inclusion* through the building of contexts and practices that benefit diversity in classrooms (Alcaraz and Arnaiz, 2020; Arnaiz, 2019).

Support during learning is one of the elements that provides a clear outlook on the aspirations and actions that centres carry out to establish inclusion in a more revealing, transparent manner. In itself, organization of support, contextualizing it, how it works and the roles of the participants who perform these functions can guide or hinder the success of the response to diversity of the centre as a whole (Sandoval *et al.*, 2018).

The response to diversity by a centre defines its model of support, which can be either inclusive or exclusive, depending on how the elements are coordinated through internal organization (Rappoport *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, a certain degree of misalignment between the skills and/or capabilities of students and the demands subject to educational policies imposed by the administration have been observed (Navarro-Montaño *et al.*, 2021). Either the spaces, times, methodologies, grouping and resources used to deal with diversity can favour equal learning opportunities at schools and guarantee the presence, participation, access and the socio-educational success of all the students (Rappoport and Echeita, 2018). Correct structuring of teaching tasks and the shared responsibility concerning diversity by the educational community on the other hand, can promote educational cultures, policies and practices at schools which favour implementation of inclusive support models (Eklund *et al.*, 2020).

In order to achieve these premises, specialist support staff represent a fundamental figure at schools, who, in coordination with the rest of the teachers can implement the necessary changes in classrooms to accomplish inclusion. This could be achieved through adapting the syllabus to the students' different socio-educational levels and characteristics (Sandoval *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, different research (García and Garrote, 2021; Sandoval *et al.*, 2019) has proved that the functions of these professionals are strongly based on direct attention to students who are considered to have *special educational needs* (hereinafter, SEN).

In the Region of Murcia, where this research was carried out, the Order of 21st June de 2012, of the Education, Training and Employment Council, establishing the general criteria to determine the real needs of teachers at Infant and Primary Schools, Special Educational Needs Schools and Grouped Rural Schools, sets forth in Article 15 that support staff (Therapeutic Pedagogy Teachers and Hearing and Language Teachers):

Shall attend to the significant, permanent special educational needs of students, associated with mental, sensory and physical disabilities and severe personality disorders, always in collaboration with the class teacher, and where applicable with the rest of the teachers. Likewise, they shall participate in the design and implementation of the syllabus adaptations for students with limited intelligence and other students who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. (pp. 27572-27573)

This fact not only restricts their role and level of participation at the centre, but it also leads to a Balkanised understanding and organisation of teaching support focusing on the students' deficiencies outside of the mainstream classroom (Abellán *et al.*, 2021), which is obviously not in line with the paradigm of inclusive education. These teachers are specialised professionals who cater to a specific group of students rather than supporting mainstream teachers and all the other students in the class. This is not aligned with the inclusive education budget, which needs to be reviewed. An example of this is provided in the research by Sandoval *et al.* (2019), which emphasizes an out of context organization of support in ordinary and circumscribed classrooms, mainly in regard to instrumental areas such as language and mathematics, ignoring the unde-

niable potential that support teachers can exercise in the promotion of schooling for all (Moya, 2012).

Likewise, in the study by Nadal *et al.* (2016) it is shown that actions targeting SEN students, are not very closely related to the educational processes in mainstream classrooms, leading to parallel learning with different materials, whether inside or outside mainstream classrooms. This strong trend, which places support outside of mainstream classrooms and creates corrective/compensatory strategies, is determined by the results of the psycho-pedagogical reports and a strong inheritance of the deficit model (Guerra, 2018).

In order to create an inclusive climate in the classroom, a considerable number of authors warn about the need to optimize coordination, dialogue and responsibilities regarding diversity among the support staff and mainstream teachers (Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2020; Sandoval *et al.*, 2018; Simón *et al.*, 2018), since these are necessary conditions to ensure that mainstream classrooms are established as a space of reference to carry out all learning.

The tasks of support staff have been redirected towards the centre as a whole in several countries, with support staff acting as inclusion coordinators or advisers. By employing this model, support staff offer advice to the mainstream teachers and cooperate with each other to create true transformations in the teaching / learning processes in mainstream classrooms, and also in adaptation to diversity and inclusion in the school itself (Arnaiz and Escarbajal, 2021; Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2020; Rappoport and Echeita, 2018). This transformation must take place through the design, planning and reformulation of educational spaces, taking the reality of existing diversity as the baseline through dialogue, innovation and initial and ongoing teacher training (Muntaner *et al.*, 2021).

In this regard, planning and shared responsibility, reflection, leadership, cooperation and training on diversity as well as defining specific centre projects that unify experiences shared through active group methodologies, and the creation of a permanent ongoing training system where all teachers organise their work with a view to inclusion, are all fundamental factors to measure the degree of competence that teachers have in developing inclusive educational practices (Rappoport and Echeita, 2018). These skills must be the goal in regard to training, and must be equal in all teacher training plans, so that training can unify the common goal of inclusion and so that *teaching everybody* is shared by all the teaching staff (UNESCO, 2017).

In Spain, a restructuring of the teaching roles is required so that support and mainstream teachers move away from the segregated, individualist and categorical support outlook that so characterises it. This entails establishing the mainstream classroom as the usual place for support activities (Pérez-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021), so that all the students can benefit from them.

Both training and experience by the teaching staff can be used as indicators that positively affect the creation of inclusion processes among the teaching staff (Boer *et al.*, 2011). These factors can increase the leadership and responsibility necessary for teachers to act as *precursors to inclusion*, insofar as a greater conception of self-sufficiency is created to achieve inclusive learning tasks that reach all students (Vaz *et al.*,

2015). From an emotional point, reformulating how support and mainstream teachers perform their tasks could provide greater motivation and job satisfaction. This way, teachers would be better assisted in their work, through the creation of joint tasks based on dialogue, reflection and innovation, which would lead to establishing cooperation networks leading to better educational praxis and school *ethos* (Arnaiz *et al.*, 2018; Eklund *et al.*, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, educational institutions need to move away from the preconceived idea that different types of teachers need to be trained for different types of students, so that responsibilities are shared and tasks can be carried out jointly (Symeonidou, 2017).

Likewise, the research carried out by Sandoval *et al.* (2019) on support teachers shows that the level of job satisfaction is positive, although it could be significantly improved. This was also stated by Ruiz-Quiles *et al.* (2015) who claim that the existence of certain elements in school environments can lead to a lack of motivation, which influences professional development.

In agreement with the aforementioned theory / argument, the general objective of this study was to analyse the organisation of support at primary and secondary education centres as perceived by professional support staff. Understanding this reality is achieved through three specific objectives:

1. Describing how support is carried out by specialist teachers.
2. Identifying the space where specialist teachers carry out educational support and the degree of suitability of these spaces for the target students.
3. Knowing job satisfaction by support teachers in accordance with the elements that positively influence the performance of their tasks to favour inclusion at schools.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. *Design of the research*

The study is encompassed within a mixed descriptive, non-experimental design, since the results combine the processing of closed questions for quantitative data and open questions for qualitative data. This design is in line with a QUAN-QUAL approach, where there is no dominant status in data processing, since the analysed data are equally weighted. This way, the results “permit obtaining greater evidence and understanding of the phenomena and therefore they facilitate the strengthening of the theoretical and practical knowledge” (Pereira, 2011, p. 19).

### 2.2. *Participants*

The study population consists of specialist support teachers (PT and/or AL) who carry out their work in the Autonomous Region of Murcia (Spain), covering a total of eight infants, primary and secondary schools. The choice of our sample is in line with intentional non-probabilistic sampling, since the aim was to find out the perceptions of a specific group, i.e. support teachers in the selected region. The sample invited

to take part consisted of 28 support teachers (PT and/or AL) who make up these members of staff at eight schools in the region. The actual sample was 23 participants (Table 1), which also accounts for a confidence level of the sample of 95 % ( $Z = 1,96$ ) and a margin of error under 5 %.

<b>TABLE 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participant sample</b>			
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Sex</b>		<b>Educational stage</b>	
Woman	20 (87.0 %)	Pre-school and primary	16 (69.6 %)
Man	3 (13.0 %)	Secondary	7 (30.4 %)
<b>Professional profile</b>		<b>Teaching experience</b>	
Therapeutic pedagogy	14 (60.9 %)	0-5 years	5 (21.7 %)
Hearing and language	5 (21.7 %)	6-10 years	5 (21.7 %)
Therapeutic pedagogy / Hearing and language	4 (17.4 %)	More than 10 years	13 (52.2 %)
<b>Type of centre</b>			
Public	18 (78.3 %)		
Private	5 (21.7 %)		

Source: Own elaboration.

### 2.3. Information compilation instrument

The information compilation instrument was the “Questionnaire on support teacher functions” published by Sandoval *et al.* (2019). The reliability value of the questionnaire was 0,877, according to Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. Table 2 shows a structure consisting of four dimensions and 14 items. Of these items, 11 were closed and required a quantitative approach, and the remaining three were open, thus allowing a qualitative view of the subject matter.

<b>TABLE 2. Structure of the questionnaire: dimensions, items and typology of the questions</b>		
Dimensions	Items	Typology
<b>Professional profile</b>	Gender	Closed multiple choice
	Job title	
	Teaching seniority	
	Educational stage	
	Ownership of the centre or type of centre	
<b>Working conditions</b>	Item 1. Type of learners you work with	Closed multiple choice
	Item 2. Degree of coordination with the teaching staff	Closed Likert 1 to 3
	Item 3. Degree of amplitude to plan	Closed Likert 1 to 3
<b>Specific support space</b>	Item 4. Existence of specific work spaces	Closed dichotomous (Yes/No)
	Item 5. Adequacy of workspaces	Closed Likert 1 to 5
	Item 6. Assessment of the workspace	Open
<b>Inclusion-enabling tasks and job satisfaction</b>	Item 7. Degree of general satisfaction	Closed Likert 1 to 5
	Item 8. Assessment of job satisfaction	Open
	Item 9. Functions that require greater dedication to promote student inclusion	Open

Source: Own elaboration.

All the participants gave their informed consent in a specific document drafted for this purpose before completing the questionnaire.

#### 2.4. Procedure

A bibliographic survey was conducted to analyse the subject matter of this research. The region, participants and information compilation instrument were selected. The schools in the region were accessed in order to inform them about the research, requesting participation by all their support teachers (PT/AL). The teachers who agreed to take part signed an informed consent document. After performing the

empirical study, a new meeting was held with the schools to inform them about the results of the research and possible improvement actions.

### 2.5. Data analysis

In order to perform the quantitative analysis, the descriptive statistics of each of the questionnaire items were calculated: mean (M), standard deviation (SD.), minimum value (Min.), maximum value (Max.), Median (Md.) and frequencies.

For the inferential analysis, non-parametric statistics were used, since the data do not obey any normal distribution because the principle of normality is not met (Shapiro-Wilk test,  $p < .001$ ) or the principle of equality of variances (Levene test,  $p < .005$ ). Consequently, to check if there were any statistically significant differences between each of the items and the established predictor variables (professional profile and teaching experience), the non-parametric statistical tests were applied, Pearson's Chi-Square and the Kruskal-Wallis H test. For the latter test, as a *post hoc* test, multiple comparisons by pairs were made using the Bonferroni test. For this purpose, a significance value  $p \leq .005$  was established. These analyses were performed using the SPSS software package (version 25 for Windows).

For qualitative data the replies to items 6 and 8 (see Table 2) were analysed. An inductive model was followed, establishing the analysis categories and the codes for classifying information. These analyses were performed using the Atlas.Ti software package (version 8 for Windows).

## 3. Results

The results will be described according to the specific objectives that were established.

Specific objective 1. *Describing how support is carried out by specialist teachers.*

In regard to how specialist teachers carry out their support functions, the descriptive analysis shows that the schools who took part give significant importance to the analysis and planning of educational actions carried out with the target pupils (see Table 3). In this sense, 65.2 % of the teachers stated that this work is carried out at their schools in a way that is both widespread and rigorous, since it analyses the set of capabilities and subjects where pupils require additional support ( $M_{I_{tem3}} = 2.65$ ). On the other hand, 34.8 % state that the analysis at their schools tends to be restricted, strict and focussed on the capabilities to learn conceptual, procedural type content in the areas considered to be instrumental in the syllabus (language, mathematics).

Likewise, it is emphasised that support teachers coordinate with their colleagues in the mainstream classrooms ( $M_{I_{tem2}} = 2.57$ ). 56.5 % state there is good coordination, whereas 43.5 % state that there is some coordination. The actions carried out by support staff are mostly to work with pupils who have been identified with *special educational needs* ( $M_{I_{tem1}} = 1.83$ ). In their interventions at schools, 17.4 % of the sup-



port teachers exclusively support SEN students, whereas 82.6 % deal with all manner of learning needs if they have time (Table 3).

<b>TABLE 3. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of the working conditions of the support teaching staff</b>							
Item 1. Do you work only with pupils who have been assessed as having special educational needs?							
Yes	If time allows, support for students with special educational needs	Never	Min.	Max.	M	Md.	SD.
17.4 %	82.6 %	0 %	1	2	1.83	2	.388
Item 2. With what degree of coordination with their reference classroom teachers in planning the work content for students receiving support?							
Scarcely or not at all coordinated	Somewhat coordinated	Highly coordinated	Min.	Max.	M	Md.	SD.
0 %	43.5 %	56.5 %	2	3	2.57	3	.507
Item 3. ¿With what degree of amplitude is carried out the work of analysis and planning of educational actions aimed at students who receive support in general?							
Restricted and not very rigorous analysis	Restricted and rigorous analysis	Comprehensive and very rigorous analysis	Min.	Max.	M	Md.	SD.
0 %	34.8 %	65.2 %	2	3	2.65	3	.487

Note: Min. (Minimum), Max. (Maximum), M. (Media), Md. (Medium), SD. (Standard deviation).  
Source: Own elaboration.

The Kruskal Wallis H-test showed no statistically significant differences in any of the above items, in regard to the professional profile of participants and their teaching experience.

Specific objective 2. *Identifying the space where specialist teachers carry out educational support and the degree of suitability for the students for receiving support.*

Insofar as the descriptive analysis results are concerned, all the support teachers claim to have a separate space outside of the mainstream classroom where they carry out their teaching work with pupils who receive educational support (see Table 4). Likewise, specialist teachers very frequently use these spaces, outside of the main-

stream classroom to carry out their educational support activities. ( $M_{item5} = 2.91$ ). 91.3 % of support teachers frequently deal with their pupils outside of the mainstream classroom, whereas the remaining 8.7 % sporadically carry out their work outside of the mainstream classroom.

The valuations by the teachers in regard to these spaces for support are very positive ( $M_{item6} = 4.30$ ). On the one hand, 52.2 % highly rate the suitability of these spaces for their work. Along the same lines, 26.1 % of the support teachers state that their space is fairly suitable. On the other hand, 21.7 % rate their spaces as moderately suitable.

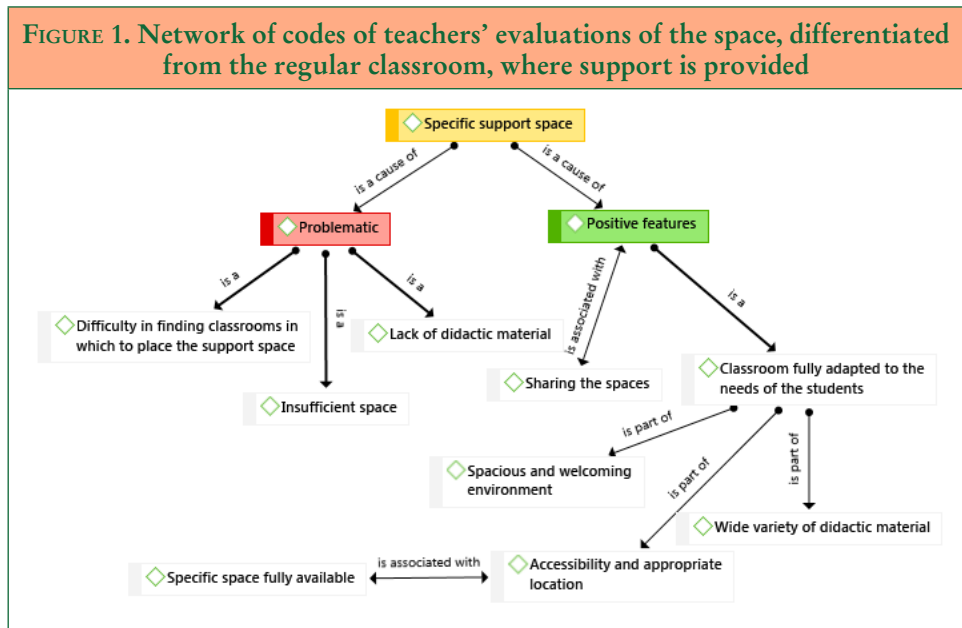
TABLE 4. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of the possession of a space differentiated from the regular classroom, frequency of use and degree of adequacy to support their pupils									
Item 4. Do you have a differentiated space from the regular classroom for working with students who require support?									
Yes		No			Min.	Max.	M.	Md.	SD.
100 %		0 %			1	1	1	1.00	.000
Item 5. How often do you carry out support with students with special educational needs outside the regular classroom?									
Never		Sometimes		Very often	Min.	Max.	M	Md.	SD.
0 %		8.7 %		91.3 %	2	3	2.91	3	.288
Item 6. If you have answered yes to Item 4, appreciate the degree of adequacy of the space differentiated from the regular classroom where educational support is provided									
Nothing suitable	Few suitable	Mod-erately suitable	Quite	Very suitable	Min.	Max.	M.	Md.	SD.
0 %	0 %	21.7 %	26.1 %	52.2 %	3	5	4.30	5.00	.822

Note: Min. (Minimum), Max. (Maximum), M. (Media), Md. (Medium), SD. (Standard deviation).  
Source: Own elaboration.

If we focus on the results obtained in the inferential analysis, Pearson's Chi-square test, applied to the *professional profile* and teaching experience variables, there are no statistically significant differences concerning this item in regard to having a different space outside of the mainstream classroom.

Likewise, the Kruskal Wallis H-test does not show any statistically significant differences in regard to the *professional profile* variable or the *teaching experience* variable for item 5. On the other hand, they did for item 6: *degree of suitability of the different space outside of the mainstream classroom for educational support*, in line with the teaching experience by participants (chi-square = 6.984;  $gI = 2$ ;  $p = .030$ ). These differences are evident among teachers with between 0 and 5 years of experience and those with between 6 and 10 years of experience ( $p = .008$ ). The highest and most positive ratings were obtained among the teachers who have between 0 and 5 years of experience (Md. = 5.00).

The results of the qualitative analysis obtained through the open question: *Why have you rated the separate space outside of the mainstream classroom that you use for educational support in this way?*, reported a total of 26 replies, whose contributions were classified in nine analysis codes (Figure 1).



Source: Own elaboration.

The nine codes taken from the support teachers' replies were divided into two analysis categories: positive and negative aspects of the spaces outside of the mainstream classrooms. In regard to the positive aspects, a significant number of teachers claim that the space includes a wide variety of educational material (N = 7.27 %), the environment is welcoming and roomy (N = 5.19 %) and accessibility and location are adequate (N = 1.4 %). Some of the participants explained it as follows:

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Because there is a wide variety of materials there which I can use to work with my pupils. (AL, primary school)

Moreover, these spaces are fully available for them (N = 1.4 %) and the rooms are suitable for their pupils' needs (N = 2.8 %).

The classroom is fairly well suited to the needs of the pupils, there is plenty of light and it is welcoming, although it is sometimes a little small when there are larger groups. (PT, primary school)

As for the negative aspects, a considerable number of support teachers believe there is a lack of educational material in the area that they use for their support classes, outside of the mainstream classroom (N = 4.15 %). Moreover, unlike other teachers, part of the teachers stated that their space is insufficient to cater to the needs of their pupils (N = 4.15 %).

The classroom is small and it should have some more ICT equipment (ITB and printer). (AL, primary school)

To a lesser extent (N = 1.4 %) the teachers also report the difficulty of finding empty rooms to use for the educational support outside of the regular classroom and they have to share the spaces with other colleagues:

Since I am the second PT at the school and it is a new position, the school did not have a specific place for me. Furthermore, there are no empty rooms this year at the school. (PT, primary school)

Specific objective 3. *Knowing job satisfaction by support teachers in accordance with the elements that positively influence the performance of their tasks to favour inclusion at schools.*

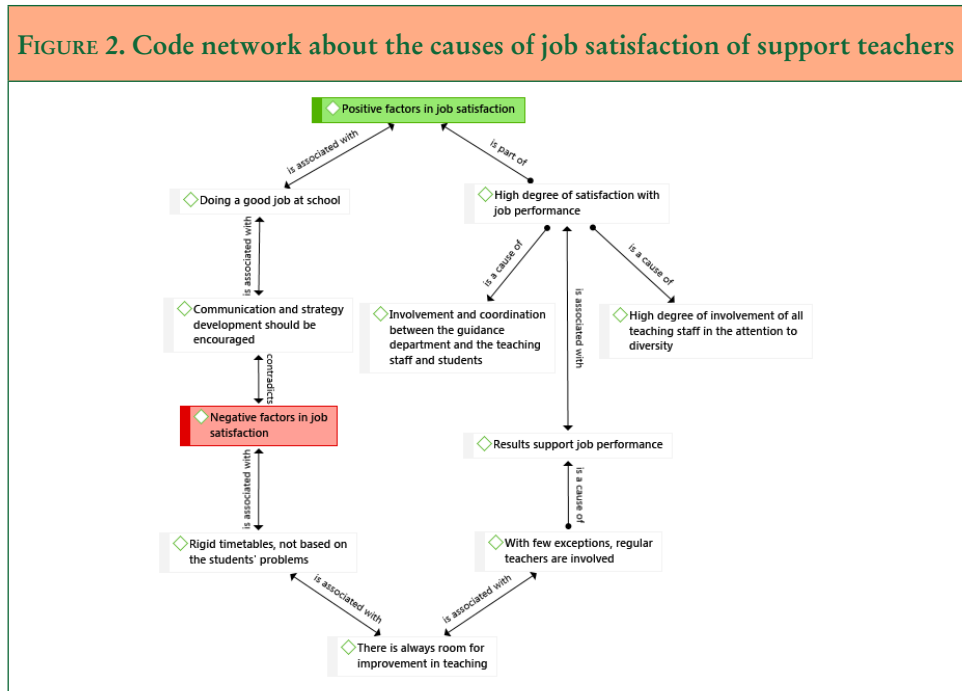
Table 5 shows a high degree of job satisfaction among support teachers ( $M_{I_{tem7}} = 4.35$ ). Only 4.4 % of the support teachers claim moderate satisfaction in their jobs. The rest of the teachers claim very high job satisfaction: 56.5 % are fairly well satisfied and 39.1 % are very satisfied in their jobs, accounting for 95.6 %.

TABLE 5. Descriptive statistics and frequencies of the job satisfaction of support teachers									
Item 7. How satisfied are you with your current professional performance?									
Not satisfied	Few	Moderately	Quite	Quite satisfied	Min.	Max.	M.	Md.	SD.
0 %	0 %	4.4 %	56.5 %	39.1 %	3	5	4.35	4.00	.573

Note: Min. (Minimum), Max. (Maximum), M. (Media), Md. (Medium), SD. (Standard deviation).  
Source: Own elaboration.

In regard to the inferential analysis, the Kruskal Wallis H-test applied to the variable *work position* reported a score of  $p \geq 0.05$  in terms of the item *degree of job satisfaction*, and therefore no statistically significant differences were found. Likewise, when this test was used to analyse the *teaching experience* variable in the same item, no statistically significant differences were identified.

The 18 quotes obtained referring to the open question: *Why did you rate your job satisfaction as you did?* Were grouped into nine analysis codes (see Figure 2).



Source: Own elaboration.

As described in the code network, two analysis categories were established to group the nine codes created for the replies by the participants.

In regard to the *Positive job satisfaction factors*, a large number of quotes by the teachers was compiled, showing a high degree of job satisfaction (N = 5.27 %). These statements justify them with the good educational results obtained through their work, which therefore endorses their work at the schools (N = 3.16 %) and the high degree of engagement by all the teachers in regard to diversity (N = 2.11 %).

Because attending to diversity is highly rated at my school. It is a priority, and that is how all the involved teachers see it. (AL, primary school)

Because the engagement of teachers with the Special Needs Pupils that I deal with is good and they make the relevant adaptations to cater to their needs. (Pt, primary school).

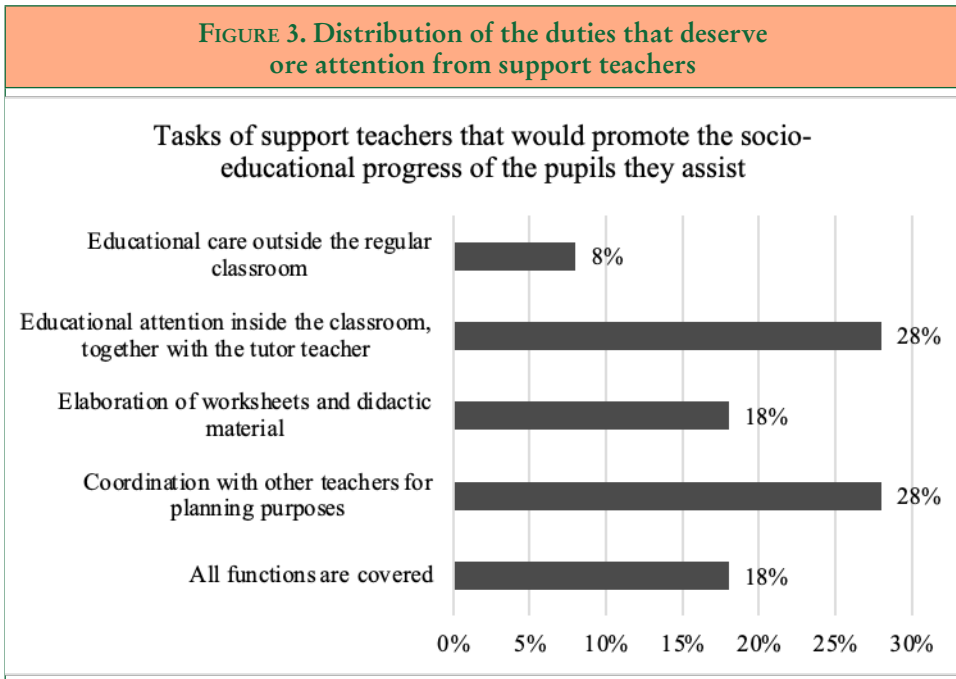
Furthermore, support teachers highlight the strong engagement and coordination between the guidance department, teaching staff and pupils (N = 2.6%).

Because in general terms the guidance department is highly engaged and coordinated with the teaching staff and pupils. (Pt, primary school)

In regard to the opposite category: *Negative factors for teachers' job satisfaction*, support teachers work on the basis that teaching can always improve (N = 3.16 %). Among the aspects that hinder positive rating in their job satisfaction are: the communication potential between teachers and the development of joint, inclusive teaching strategies (N = 1.6 %), and the inflexibility of timetables and times that do not consider the difficulties of pupils (N = 1.6 %).

The groups are established according to a timetable for the pupils and not based on their problems (e.g., mixing dyslexia with autism spectrum disorder, functional diversity at intellectual level with specific language disorder).

Finally, we wanted to know which of the tasks performed by support staff would enhance the socio-educational progress of pupils (see Figure 3). The most commonly mentioned tasks were coordination with their colleagues (28 %) and catering to their pupils' needs in the mainstream classrooms (28 %). Preparation of work sheets and other specific materials (18 %) and attention outside of the mainstream classroom (8 %) were also significant aspects. 18 % of teachers' state that they cover all their functions on a daily basis.



Source: Own elaboration.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In regard to *how specialist teaching support is carried out (PT and AL)*, the findings show that over half of these teachers claim that their schools analyse pupils' needs, and plan support around this in a broader, more rigorous manner. Consequently, they consider that they take the capabilities and needs of their pupils into account, and choose appropriate material in the different areas of the syllabus (Simón *et al.*, 2018). These results agree with the inclusive education budgets in regard to support teacher staff working to ensure contents are made available to pupils (Navarro-Montaño *et al.*, 2021), ensuring flexibility and structuring of teaching tasks, spaces, time, methodologies, groups and resources used to achieve socio-educational inclusion (Eklund *et al.*, 2020).

Nevertheless, this is not a unanimous opinion since over one third of teachers stated that the analysis of support is restricted and inflexible, and focuses on the ability to learn conceptual and procedural type content in the areas of the syllabus known as *instrumental* (language, mathematics). The same results are reported in the study by Sandoval *et al.* (2019) and by Abellán *et al.* (2021) where it was proved that there is a balkanised, individualist organisation of learning support, focusing on pupils' deficits,

which does not break down the barriers that hinder inclusion during learning, regardless of the subjects that are taught.

This approach ignores the fact that support by specialists should not be exclusively focussed on special needs pupils, but also on mainstream teachers, which would help to implement changes and improvements in the teaching/learning processes with all the pupils in mainstream classrooms (Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2020; Rappoport and Echeita, 2018). This would foster a better understanding of support teaching and other teaching roles, which would allow support to be extended to the school as a whole, through which the teachers in mainstream classrooms and support teachers can establish links for reflection, planning and innovation with a view to achieving inclusion in mainstream classrooms (Pérez-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021).

The degree of coordination between support teachers and regular teachers was positive in this study. Nevertheless, the responsibility for the teaching/learning process of students who are provided support lies with the specialist teachers. These results indicate the prevalence of a model focussing on learning deficits rather than collaborative support where all the centre's teachers share the tasks and responsibilities in pursuit of achieving truly inclusive educational support (Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2020; Sandoval *et al.*, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). Therefore, greater coordination to encourage shared responsibilities and shared tasks will be required. This would lead to educational, cultural and practical classroom environments that are more aware of diversity through cooperation networks, dialogue, reflection and teaching innovation (Arnaiz *et al.*, 2018; Eklund *et al.*, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

In regard to students who the support teachers work with, the study shows that priority is given to pupils identified as special needs pupils, as already shown in other studies (García and Garrote, 2021; Sandoval *et al.*, 2019; Simón *et al.*, 2018). These statements also endorse follow-up of the Order of 21st June 2012, which establishes in Article 15 that support teachers “shall cater to pupils with significant, permanent special educational needs associated with mental, sensory and physical disorders and severe personality disorders” (p. 27572). Most support teachers state that they only deal with other students not included in the above category “when they have time”.

The study did not reveal any significant differences in regard to the three items comprising the first objective, which are: the profile of the pupils that support teachers work with; degree of coordination between support teachers and regular teachers; and the degree of scope in regard to the analysis and planning of educational support, both concerning job positions and teaching experience.

Knowing whether or not support teachers *have their own space outside of the mainstream classroom for support activities*, how often they use it and how it was rated, was very interesting. All the PT and AL who participated in the study state that they do have a space outside of the mainstream classroom for their work with special needs pupils. These spaces are considered as their own classrooms, as ideal places for individual attention for their pupils, and it is rather surprising to observe that the teachers with less experience, between 0 and 5 years, are those who rated these separate spaces more positively.



Nearly all the teachers state that they carry out support teaching for special needs pupils in these classrooms rather than in the mainstream classrooms. This has also been observed in other research work, highlighting the fact that inclusive education has still not reached the teaching / learning processes of all pupils (Arnaiz, 2019; UNESCO, 2017). The conception of higher values of support outside of the classroom follows, although this entails separating out pupils who attend them and support becoming a true barrier for inclusion for all the pupils in the mainstream classrooms.

This way, mainstream classrooms are deprived of the benefits of teaching actions that could be implemented with all pupils while using existing resources and materials in those spaces outside of the mainstream classrooms. The lack of presence of special needs pupils in the mainstream classrooms moves them away from their full projection and learning in mainstream classrooms and hinders the possibility of all pupils learning together, each according to their own possibilities and potential. There can be no doubt that teachers need to discover other, more collaborative ways of providing support at schools (Arnaiz and Escarbajal, 2021; Paulsrud and Nilholm, 2020).

There is also a very positive rating in regard to these classrooms insofar as in general, specialist teachers consider that they are fully adapted to needs of SEN pupils, insofar as they are welcoming, accessible and have a wealth of educational material. In our opinion, this is where efforts need to be made to ensure the same is true in mainstream classrooms, so that support can be given there too. A minority of specialist teachers highlighted negative factors about these spaces outside the mainstream classrooms, considering them to be insufficient, lacking in educational material in order to carry out their work, and adding in some cases the difficulty of finding empty classrooms where they could do their work. These results reinforce the unjustified decoupling of support, even when the contextual conditions are not conducive to providing support outside of mainstream classrooms. This fact could be explained by the inheritance of support through the former corrective-compensatory model, through which the idea was to mitigate deficiencies in the reports resulting from psycho-pedagogical assessments (Guerra, 2018).

In view of the statistically significant differences, attention is brought to the fact that teachers with between 0 and 5 years of experience rate the suitability of the spaces where their work is carried out more than those with more teaching experience (between 6 and 10 years). These results do not align with the conclusion drawn in the studies by Boer *et al.* (2011) and Vaz *et al.* (2015), where teaching experience positively affects the management, suitability and the development of inclusive learning processes.

The study shows that *job satisfaction* among support staff is highly positive, which coincides with the findings in the study by Sandoval *et al.* (2019). Although the support model of these teachers has been shown to focus on pupils' deficits in the objectives defined in the model, which is carried out in separate classrooms and that the responsibility for pupils with more learning difficulties lies with the specialist teachers, almost exclusively, they claim that diversity is valued at their schools and that it is a priority. The high level of job satisfaction through the progress made by special needs students after working with them in support classrooms is also significant, and

the good socio-educational results are highlighted, thus endorsing the work by these professionals along with a high degree of cooperation and engagement by the educational community. All these aspects mean an inclusive atmosphere for them, owing to the cooperation and shared responsibilities they refer to (Paulsrud and Nilholm 2020; Sandoval *et al.*, 2018).

Part of the teachers' state that job satisfaction is conditioned by negative factors that need to be changed at schools in order to improve their work. They refer to rigid timetables that do not take the pupils' difficulties into account, and to the existing misalignment between the skills and/or capabilities of pupils and the strict educational demands that are imposed without considering these needs/realities (Navarro-Montaña *et al.*, 2021).

Other elements that hinder full job satisfaction of support teachers, and which affect their motivation, are the lack of communication between teachers and the lack of design of a joint strategy that would benefit educational processes in mainstream classrooms (Ruiz-Quiles *et al.*, 2015). These results ratify the growing need to establish cooperation networks based on dialogue, reflection and joint innovation to achieve common learning processes and to design the planning of joint spaces where this can be achieved (Eklund *et al.*, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Muntaner *et al.*, 2021), where the tasks carried out by mainstream teachers and support teachers are unified in order to ensure learning can be carried out in mainstream classrooms (Pérez-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021). To do so, the roles must be redefined in pursuit of inclusion, training teaching staff in cooperative planning, joint responsibility, reflection and leadership to ensure that all pupils learn in the same spaces, thereby eliminating the deeply-rooted idea of different teachers for diversity pupils (Rappoport and Echeita, 2018; Symeonidou, 2017; UNESCO, 2017).

Finally, support teachers consider dedicating more time to favour optimum socio-educational progress of their pupils as a priority task, in conjunction with more educational attention within the mainstream classroom and better coordination with their colleagues in these classrooms to plan more effective work with a view to inclusion (Pérez-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021). The considerable number of teachers who state that they should spend more time supporting their pupils outside of the mainstream classrooms is rather striking. This fact minimises the high potential that support teachers have in mainstream classrooms to create inclusive educational processes that are common to the whole class (Alcaraz and Arnaiz, 2020; Arnaiz, 2019; Moya, 2012).

Indeed, considering the important role of support teachers in identifying, erasing and adapting socio-educational elements that hinder the presence, participation and success of all pupils in mainstream classrooms, it can be concluded that their tasks should encompass a continuous reform of schooling, where they function as *facilitators* to create fully inclusive spaces. Nevertheless, the study has proved that this is a far cry from reality. The organisation of support teaching and the tasks and roles that they perform at the analysed schools, are still tightly bound to the corrective, compensatory model centred around the pupils' deficits, which removes it from an inclusive, curricular support approach.

Organisation of educational support, analysed through the tasks and roles of support teachers, is based on a set of specific measures, preferably individualised, that cater to the needs of pupils with special educational needs. Nevertheless, this segregated approach to support does not manage to cover all spheres of the school, owing to rules, attitudes and training. This means that teaching tasks and the configuration and organisation of support teaching do not allow distracting other pupils, who could likewise benefit from it, and could even act as human resources for the support staff by collaborating and helping their peers.

The so called *Special Educational Needs Report* stemming from psycho-pedagogical assessments is understood as a set of difficulties that need to be mitigated, and this in itself leads to three negative factors: the labelling and segregation of certain students from mainstream classrooms; the division of support in certain areas, pre-emptively instrumental, such as language and mathematics, which makes achieving general support for the mainstream classroom that permit transversality of subjects and their content; and the configuration of support based on learning deficiencies and/or difficulties, which does not promote skills and excludes other students who could also require this type of support.

In view of the foregoing, support continues to face a number of barriers that prevent educational support from reaching the school as a whole, so that it can be used as a teaching resource in mainstream classrooms, avoiding segregation, for all pupils who may require it at some time during their schooling.

We are thus able to conclude that firstly the extent to which educational support is organised and regulated is characterised by being restrictive at many schools, merely focussing on the instrumental parts of the syllabus (language and mathematics) and is carried out through an approach that aims to compensate pupils' difficulties. In regard to collaboration between support and mainstream teachers, it is favourable. Nevertheless, we have seen that the responsibilities concerning attention and teaching of pupils with greater difficulties are not always shared, as is evident in that specialist teaching staff take the initiative in proposing the teachings that pupils who receive support are to be given. Moreover, educational support is seen as a deeply rooted measure focussing on the so-called *Special Educational Needs Report*, and therefore support teachers' tasks are almost exclusively limited to teaching outside of mainstream classrooms, sometimes individually.

Secondly, all the participant teachers have a specific space where they are able to cater to their pupils, either individually or in small groups, and this is where most of the support teaching is carried out. These classrooms, known as support classrooms, are very highly rated by these teachers, although they can also become an insurmountable barrier for inclusion.

Finally, job satisfaction among the professionals included in this study was very positive owing to the strong engagement by all the teachers with diversity and the good socio-educational results that they achieve. Nevertheless, there are some negative factors such as inflexible timetables and excessive workloads, which all lead to a lack of motivation. As measures to enhance the socio-educational progress of pupils, support staff emphasise the need to spend more time in the mainstream classrooms

and to coordinate better with their colleagues to plan educational actions. However, the idea that catering to special needs pupils is to be carried out outside of the mainstream classroom as a priority for pupils' progress is still very deeply rooted.

Addressing the limitations of this study, the participation population does not permit generalisation of the obtained results. It would also have been interesting to hold discussion groups or interviews with the participants in order to further enrich the data obtained via the questionnaire.

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