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Overrepresentation of Students from a Migrant Background in Special Education: Promoting Inclusive and Equitable Education

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Abstract: This study analyses the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education in the stage of primary education, in the region of El Campo de Gibraltar (Southern Spain). This phenomenon poses significant concerns in terms of educational equity and discrimination, as well as questions about the possible underlying causes. It was decided to address this issue from a qualitative methodology through semi-structured interviews with 16 educators of educational centres that have a significant number of students from a migrant background. The results show the need of educators for specific training in attention to diversity. Likewise, many migrant families come to Spain due to the lack of adequate attention that their children receive in their home countries. Lastly, language and cultural barriers were identified, which allow for biased assessments and subjective decisions that result in the referral of students from a migrant background to special education from a multidimensional perspective. Therefore, it is fundamental to provide training to professionals, overcome the language and cultural barriers and ensure that the necessary resources are available, thus guaranteeing an inclusive and equitable education for all students, regardless of their origin.

Keywords: overrepresentation; students from a migrant background; special education; diversity; inclusive education



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1. Introduction

The overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education constitutes a phenomenon of special interest that refers to the demonstrated tendency among students from a migrant background to be identified and placed in special education programmes at disproportionately higher rates compared to their native peers in the education system [1,2]. In the field of education, this phenomenon has been international [3,4]. The case of the USA is significant, as this is one of the most recurrent research topics in the last fifty years [5,6], since Dunn [7] highlighted the overrepresentation in special education of not only migrant children, but also children from social minorities and non-middle-class family environments. However, in Spain, the phenomenon of overrepresentation has received rather insufficient attention, despite the important migrant movements recorded, especially in the south, and in spite of the warnings given already in 2005 by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia [8] about the large number of students from a migrant background in special education centres in Europe.

The phenomenon of overrepresentation of students from a migrant background and students from minorities in special education poses significant concerns that cannot be ignored, as they affect Human Rights and Children's Rights, which are related to educational equity, social justice and inclusion, and these concepts are strongly related to each other within a desirable culture of peace in educational centres, as has been recently stated by Añaños et al. [9]:

“The movement for a culture of peace and non-violence [. . .] conceives peace as a construction, as a project that concerns all citizens. The ingredients to achieve this are: democracy, dialogue, solidarity, justice and a spirit open to difference and diversity. The latter are the ingredients of inclusive education in schools, where educational work is an instrument of transformation” (pp. 24–25)

In this sense, and within this context, the aim of this study was to analyse the phenomenon of overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education centres, specifically in the stage of primary education, in the region of El Campo de Gibraltar (Southern Spain), which is an area characterised by the arrival of an important migration flow.

1.1. Inclusive Education to Transform Education and Society

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [10] underlines the importance of the full and effective inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of life. This convention establishes fundamental principles that advocate for non-discrimination, equal opportunities and respect for human diversity. Similarly, it recognises people with disabilities as full rights-holding individuals and promotes their active participation in society. Within this framework, inclusive education emerges as an essential objective, aiming to guarantee an equitable access to education for students with disabilities in conventional schools [11,12].

However, this goal cannot be met in the short term, as it implies a process of evolution and development that requires time. Studies reveal that inclusive education not only contributes to the social development of all students, but it also improves educational opportunities as a whole [13]. Additionally, it promotes understanding and tolerance, playing a key role in the eradication of prejudice and discrimination against students with disabilities.

Studies such as that of Achamrah [14] demonstrate that students with disabilities at conventional schools reach high performance in both the academic and social scopes compared to their peers at special education centres. This perspective finds consensus in the belief that the education of students with disabilities can be easily adapted to the general curriculum. Therefore, it is obvious that most students with disabilities do not attain an optimal progress in their education when they are isolated, thus emphasising the importance of inclusion as a means to ensure the full exercise of their right to education [15].

Therefore, it is considered that inclusive education not only represents a fundamental right supported by international agreements, but it also stands as a means toward a fairer and more equitable society. To achieve the full inclusion of students with disabilities in conventional schools, it is essential to implement inclusive policies and provide the necessary training and resources for teachers to create a welcoming and enriching educational environment for everyone, regardless of their differences. This approach not only benefits students with disabilities, but it also enriches the educational experience of all students and promotes greater understanding and tolerance in society as a whole [12].

1.2. Overrepresentation of Students from Ethnic Minorities in Special Education Centres

Diversity in the classroom, in terms of cultural origin, language skills, or disabilities, is an increasing reality that educators must face [16]. Inequality in the educational success of students from a migrant background of ethnic minorities persists as a serious problem [17,18]. These students have a greater representation in special education compared to their Caucasian peers [19], which is a concern that has prevailed for decades [7,18–20]. This overrepresentation in special education centres demands immediate attention and action [21]. With the aim of improving the success rates of these students, it is essential to implement programmes that promote early intervention, respect the different cultures and address the specific challenges of the latter [22].

In Spain, special education is governed by Organic Law 3/2020, also known as the LOMLOE, which establishes the structure and services for students with special educational needs (SEN). Since each group of students has specific characteristics and needs, which require adequate curricular adaptations [23], the LOMLOE emerges as a legal framework that sets

measures of attention to diversity, curricular adaptations and specific resources to guarantee an inclusive education. For a student to be referred to this system, she/he must have gone through a process of identification and valuation of her/his educational needs by competent professionals. However, the decision of referring the student to a special education centre is jointly made by parents, teachers and professionals. Although the ultimate goal is to benefit the student, there is some criticism of the referral of these students to special education systems, as it can lead to the segregation of the students and the stigmatisation of their educational needs, thereby limiting, for instance, their opportunities to interact with peers without disabilities, and thus affecting their social inclusion [24,25].

Therefore, educators must be ready to attend to different needs and capabilities, since classroom diversity demands a constant adaptation of the pedagogical strategies. In this sense, it is necessary to provide specific and adequate training to educators, in order to guarantee that they can attend to diversity, especially in centres with students and families of particular characteristics [26–28].

In the case of students from a migrant background with disabilities, they often face unique challenges, such as language and cultural barriers. The current lack of diversified training makes it urgent to develop specific training in each educational centre, adapting it to their realities [29]. Consequently, specific training may help educators to effectively respond to these needs. This fact is not only necessary to guarantee equal opportunities, but it also contributes significantly to improving the academic performance and general wellbeing of all students, in general, and migrant students with disabilities, in particular [30].

In turn, language barriers represent a significant challenge for students from ethnical minorities in special education [31,32]. These barriers are often mistaken for learning difficulties, while the actual problem lies in a lack of understanding of the language [33–35]. The monolingual perspective of schools may influence the evaluation and support of these students, contributing to the problem of unequal representation [1]. To address this, it is crucial to adopt a holistic and intersectional approach, promoting cultural sensitivity and early intervention strategies [17]. Moreover, families, educators and health professionals must collaborate with each other to provide adequate support to the students [18].

Consequently, to fight the disproportionate representation in special education, it is fundamental to adopt culturally responsive educational systems that value and use the culture, language and experiences of all students [36]. This requires a profound transformation in the assumptions and practices of the educational structure, from classrooms to decision making in the school system [37]. Collaboration and transforming change are essential for the attainment of a more equitable education system that receives cultural diversity.

1.3. Situation of Students with Special Educational Needs from Morocco

Although the intersection between cultural diversity and special education has not been thoroughly explored in the Spanish context (where this study was conducted), the topic of migration received considerable attention in the 1990s [38]. From the mid-1980s, the economic growth in Spain led to an increase in the number of migrants who settled in this country, resulting in a population of migrants that represents 14% of the total population of Spain. Thus, during the 2000s, Spain emerged as a relevant destination for international migration. According to the data provided by the Spanish Institute of Statistics, in 2021 [39], 5,375,917 migrants lived in Spain, of whom 775,936 were from Morocco, representing 14.4% of the migrant population, i.e., the highest percentage of migrant citizens.

Specifically, the Report on the Integration of Foreign Students in the Spanish Education System [8] states that, in the education scope, Spain has 30% of students from a migrant background from Africa, followed by the European Union (24%) and Latin America (21%). In the academic year 2021/22, a total of 882,814 migrant students were registered, representing 11% of the total body of students and almost 15% of the total migrant population in Spain. Regarding special education, in the academic year 2020/2021, 5135 migrant students were registered in public and private educational centres in Spain, of whom 1154 students were in Catalonia, 934 in the Community of Madrid and 670 in Andalusia [8]. These data

indicate a significant increase compared to previous years, underlying the importance of understanding the migratory phenomenon between Spain and Morocco [40].

Two of the factors that can be identified in the migration of Moroccan families in Spain are [41]: (1) academic training and (2) the educational attention given to their children. During the last two decades, the education system of Morocco has faced a series of significant challenges that have led it to the limit of its capacity [14,42]. Moreover, the academic level of Moroccan migrant students is notably lower than that of Spanish students, and even that of the rest of the migrant community [38]. In this sense, and according to the National Immigrant Survey Report [43], 57% of individuals aged 16–64 years had not completed primary education (in contrast with 29% of all non-community migrants and 20% of migrants born in Spain), and only 3% had completed higher education (compared to 13% and 19%, respectively). Measures such as the Spanish Letter of Education and the Emergency Plan were developed to correct the deficiencies of the Moroccan education system [42]. However, despite these efforts, the results obtained to date appear to have been insufficient. This situation is demonstrated in the disproportionate representation of Moroccan students in other countries, as is the case of Spain.

Moreover, although different factors have been reported to contribute to this disproportion, little effort has been made [44,45] to place these factors in the context of broader social and sociological phenomena, such as the cultural construction of disability, categories of disability and conceptualisations of individual difference. In addition, the challenges identified in the communication processes due to the language and cultural differences may, in certain cases, hinder mutual understanding [31,38,46,47].

Due to the scant and outdated literature on this topic, we consider that this study is very relevant, not only for the knowledge generated, but also for the new research lines that can be developed from its results, which are necessary, real and up-to-date. Thus, with the aim of contributing to the findings of other authors, the aim of this study was to analyse the causes of the overrepresentation of students from ethnic minorities (including both students born outside of the study country and students born in the study country with a migrant family background), mostly Moroccan, in special education centres in the region of El Campo de Gibraltar (Southern Spain). The following research questions guided the analysis:

- What is the experience and training of teachers and specialists who work in special education centres in the region of El Campo de Gibraltar?
- What are the main reasons that lead families to migrate and school their children in a different country?
- What barriers do professionals identify with the families during the schooling period of students from a migrant background?

2. Materials and Methods

The present study is framed within the project entitled “Study on the disproportionate representation of students from a migrant background in special education centres in the province of Cádiz” (MigraNEE Cádiz), funded by the University of Cádiz-Convocatoria Proyectos Puente (REF. PR2022-056). The project analyses the different education stages (primary education, secondary education and basic vocational training); however, the data presented in this study are specifically focused on the stage of primary education.

The aim of the present work was to analyse the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education, specifically in primary education, in centres of the area of El Campo de Gibraltar (Southern Spain). To this end, a qualitative methodology was followed, based on the interview technique.

This study was conducted from an ecological-cultural and inclusive approach [48,49], justified by the need to know and delve into the different discourses provided by the participants included in this investigation. Thus, with the use of thorough interviews, the aim was to generate knowledge through the voices of those involved in this phenomenon, with the participation of the community.

2.1. Participants

A total of 16 interviews were conducted in two special education centres, an early childhood and primary education centre and an Educational Guidance Team (EGT) of the area. The anonymity of all participants and educational centres of reference was guaranteed throughout the process. Table 1 shows the final sample.

When selecting the educational centres, it was necessary to establish a profile of their students and families who met the characteristics of this study. Consequently, the selection of participants was based on the following criteria:

- Education centres with a larger number of students from a migrant background with disabilities compared to other centres (this information was provided by the counsellors of the EGT);
- Educational centres located in the area of El Campo de Gibraltar, in Southern Spain.
- Counsellors of the EGT of the province in charge of deciding the schooling modality of the children;
- Teachers of specific classrooms in ordinary centres;
- Teachers of specific special education centres;
- Willingness to participate.

Table 1. Sample of participants.

Centres	Interviewed Staff	Codes
Special Education Centre 1	Principal	Pri1
	Counsellor	C8
	Head of Studies	HS1
Special Education Centre 2	Principal (Pri2)	Pri2
	Head of Studies (HS2)	HS2
	T1 (Teacher)	T
	Counsellor	C9
Early Childhood and Primary Education Centre	Teacher Specialised in Therapeutic Pedagogy, Specific Therapeutic Classroom	TP1
	Teacher Specialised in Therapeutic Pedagogy	TP2
	Teacher Specialised in Therapeutic Pedagogy	TP3
	Social Integration Technician	SIT
Educational Guidance Team (EGT)	Counsellor	C1
	Counsellor	C2
	Counsellor	C3
	Counsellor	C4
	Counsellor	C5

2.2. Instrument

For the gathering of information, two ad hoc semi-structured interviews were designed, based on relevant questions about the profile of the educators, the situation of the students and their families and aspects that may explain the phenomenon of overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education. The interviews were revised and piloted by the research team of the project. After making the proposed changes, the script of the interviews was revised and the final changes were made.

The interviews were designed inductively, with open-ended questions. Individualised interviews were developed for the counsellors of the EGT, the principals, the teachers and specialists in therapeutic pedagogy (TP) and hearing and speech (HES), and the social integration technician (SIT).

2.3. Procedure

To access the potential participants, the EGT of the area was contacted, and the nature and goals of the project that encompasses this study were presented to the members of the EGT. Their collaboration was requested, as well as establishing contact with the centres that met the characteristics of this study.

Once the information of the centres was obtained, these were contacted, agreeing to a date and time for the interviews, taking into account their availability.

Each participating group had an interview script specifically adapted to it, with approximately 40 min each. The interviews were conducted individually and in groups, face-to-face, and they were guided by the members of the research team. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were asked to provide their informed consent to have their conversations recorded, in order to gather every detail, notifying them that these would only be used for academic purposes, guaranteeing their confidentiality and anonymity. Lastly, all interviews were transcribed.

2.4. Data Analysis

Based on the data analysis systematisation model of Miles and Huberman [50], after gathering the data and transcribing the interviews, the information was reduced. This process consists in “selecting, focusing and abstracting the raw data into units of meaning, known as content categories” ([51], p. 358).

Regarding the categorisation of the content, Rodríguez et al. [52] pointed out that this process implies “judging, valuing whether certain units can or cannot be included in a certain code, and making decisions in that respect” (p. 210).

Taking into account the indications for this process, from the present study, a code was assigned to each unit of meaning; each of these codes refers to the categories in which they are included. This coding process was carried out inductively, thus the categories emerged from the testimonies of the participants.

Once the coding process was performed, three general categories were defined, which refer to the professionals who had been interviewed, as well as to the information they provided in relation to the students and their families. Likewise, subcategories were established for each of the categories identified.

Table 2 shows the categories and subcategories extracted from the analysis of the interviews and their corresponding codes.

Table 2. System of categories and codes assigned.

Categories	Code	Definition	Subcategories	Code	Definition
Training	PRO	It comprises the initial and continuous training received by the education professionals.	Initial training	FORIN	Academic qualification to carry out the professional position.
			Specific continuous training	FORCON	Training received on attention to diversity.
			Professional experience	EXP	Previous professional trajectory of education professionals.
			Specialised staff	PER	Psychopedagogues, special education professionals, social integration technicians (SIT).
Motives	MOT	Reasons for the family to migrate to Spain with their children.	Attention in the country of origin	ATENOR	Measures applied to attend to the educational needs of the minor in the country of origin.
			Attention in the host country	ATENIN	Measures applied to attend to the educational needs of the minor in the Spanish context.

Table 2. Cont.

Categories	Code	Definition	Subcategories	Code	Definition
Barriers	BAR	Main barriers identified between the educational centre and the migrant families that can generate conflict during the schooling period of the migrant student.	Language	LIN	Barriers that appear due to the existence of different languages between the school and the family.
			Communication	COM	Difficulties in the communication process between the school and the family.
			Cultural	CUL	Differences in the reference culture between the school and the family.
			Conflict	CON	Situations of conflict generated by language, communication and cultural barriers between the school and the family.

After performing the coding process, the text fragments that corresponded to the same category and subcategory were grouped, and the entire content was revised. Then, the main ideas were synthesised, with the aim of presenting them orderly and clearly in the results. Lastly, textual quotations from the different testimonies of the participants were extracted to illustrate the results obtained in the present study.

To perform the analysis of the data extracted from the interviews, the NVivo 12 software was used.

3. Results

The results are presented in three sections that analyse, mainly, the key elements of the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education in the stage of primary education. Firstly, the previous experience of the education professionals is presented, as well as the initial and continuous training received in terms of attention to diversity and inclusion. Secondly, we show the motives that led the migrant families to migrate to Spain with their children. Lastly, this section addresses the main language, communication and educational barriers that the participants identified between the educational centre and the migrant families.

3.1. Experience and Training of the Professionals That Attend to Migrant Students with Disabilities in the Educational Centres

The professionals who work in the participating centres had certain experience in the diagnosis and detection of educational needs. They are teachers who had received specific initial training to attend to diversity and educational inclusion: 1. Special Education; 2. Physical Education; and 3. Therapeutic Pedagogy. All participants had received continuous training on attention to diversity and inclusive education. Likewise, a SIT was also interviewed, who also had a Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education and experience in centres with migrant students. However, this teacher did not mention any specific initial or continuous training on attention to diversity.

"I began with social education. Then, I continued with psychopedagogy, teaching with pedagogical therapy, and a master's degree in early intervention. Finally, I entered an early intervention centre in Malaga as an interim, and that's the training I have regarding education". (C3)

"Afterwards, I studied conflict resolution... but just a little bit. Master's degrees are poorly guided... at least in my experience... to work with this type of student". (TP1)

Secondly, the participants stated that they had received no specific training with regard to migrant students. They highlighted the need to acquire knowledge in this scope (language, conflict resolution, etc.) due to the great presence of migrant people.

“Generally, few courses related to migrant students are offered, and these are focused on teaching Spanish”. (TP3)

“Not much, really. Last year I had some trouble, because it was my first year with... most of my students were migrant students, and I received help from my colleagues in the centre. But regarding training, I would say I barely have any; there was some at university during my degree, but I don’t really remember any of that”. (TP2)

Thirdly, the participants pointed out the lack of specialised staff to attend to the students and families with different languages, stating that translators are needed in centres with a large presence of Arabic students (Spanish area of the Strait of Gibraltar).

“The language specialist comes once a week. Thus, with so little time, this specialist can’t work adequately with these students, and their tutors can’t be counselled about working with them. In fact, the work with the language specialist begins in Year 4 of primary education”. (TP3)

“We need some sort of resource, such as a translator, in these centres where there is a high percentage of migrants”. (PT3)

3.2. Reasons Why Families Migrate from Morocco to Spain: The State of Students from a Migrant Background When They Arrive in Spain

Most of the students registered in the participating centres migrated from Morocco to Spain due to the scant or null educational attention that their children receive in their home country. Most of the students are Maghrebian and, in their home country, many children with disabilities are not treated in schools; in some cases, they are attended to in associations. However, their educational needs are not covered in any case.

“The thing is that, in their country, mainly Morocco, they are extremely marginalised, and they try to bring them here so that they receive the attention they need”. (TP2)

“A person living in Morocco, for example, with no resources for their child, after visiting associations and seeing that their learning does not improve, eventually will search for whatever there is, wherever that is... if you gotta go to France, you go to France... if you hear there are resources in Cádiz, then you go to Cádiz”. (SIT)

In the case of Spain, the participants indicated that these families not only find that their children are schooled in special education centres in the mixed or pure modality, but they also receive the appropriate curricular adjustments and implementations free of charge. This is another reason why families decide to leave their home country, in some cases with neither a job nor residence, simply to ensure that their child is attended to. In other cases, they move to the homes of relatives who live in Spain, and then look for housing.

“[...] They arrive here and the centre gives them everything, because specific centres are free of charge for all children. They have specialists, physiotherapists, lunch room, transportation... they have everything; and their children are attended to”. (C8)

The participants also highlighted that most of the students arrive without a previous diagnosis or with the wrong diagnosis. Therefore, when they arrive at the Spanish educational centre, the evaluations and diagnoses are initiated by the different teams of specialists, resulting, in some cases, in incongruent assessments. Furthermore, with regard to the proportion of Spanish and migrant students in special education, although the participants did not provide exact data, they mentioned that an increasing number of migrants are referred to special education.

“In the case of students from a migrant background, they sometimes come with the wrong diagnosis, and the counsellor wouldn’t establish a totally different diagnosis; even the coordination with social services is poor, especially in Year 2 and Year 3 (primary education), where I have the most students”. (TP2)

“I didn’t count them... I don’t know how many they are, but I know that there is one in every classroom. In fact, there is an increasing number of them in the classrooms”. (HS1)

3.3. Main Barriers Identified between the Education Professionals and the Migrant Families

The participants underlined that there are numerous barriers in the schooling and educational process of students from a migrant background. Firstly, barriers such as language and the migrant parents' lack of knowledge hinder communication and their counselling. Similarly, there is a lack of willingness in some migrant families to adapt to the culture and learn the language. In some cases, this barrier makes it difficult to establish an accurate diagnosis of the needs of the students.

“But then, if you can't ask the children questions, if you can't interview them, if you can't more or less see their traits... for example, the girl we have in the specific classroom was diagnosed with ASD, but she has characteristic traits of Down syndrome. It's very difficult to make a correct diagnosis”. (SIT)

However, the participants mentioned that they use diagnostic tests focused rather on visualising the student than on the language. Nevertheless, the interviews with the tutor and the parents and the observation of the child in different contexts are affected by language; therefore, the language barrier was identified as an important limitation in the evaluation and communication of the results with the parents.

“When they just arrive at the centre or are very young, it is very difficult due to their lack of knowledge of the language and their lack of understanding”. (TP3)

The participants usually faced this difficulty using visual tools, requesting help from translators, associations or some relatives living in Spain who knew both languages.

“They always come accompanied by a relative living here who knows both languages and translates for them, or they may come with associations with people who know Arabic”. (C8)

Along with the language barrier, the participants also pointed out the cultural barrier. In this sense, migrant parents are usually more reluctant to refer their children to early intervention. Some of the participants identified the stereotype of gender as a possible barrier that may limit the diagnosis and impartiality. Some students may show distrust or pay no attention due to the gender of the professional, although the participation and attitude of the parents with centres is positive, showing gratitude for the treatment received.

“It is very visual, exactly. Many pictograms, and that, in the end, is a universal language, right? But, with the families, we sometimes have problems. In some cases, none of the two parents speaks Spanish, they don't understand well... In many cases, the mothers attend the tutorials less frequently, and the fathers are usually the heads of the families...”. (HS1)

“For example, last year, in secondary education, I observed this stereotype toward women; students aged 13, 14 and 15 years who literally told me ‘you're a woman, what can you say about this?’ When I evaluated them, they didn't really pay attention to me, because I'm a woman. They have that rooted in them. Even when some mothers attend, if the father is not also present, they don't want to listen to me”. (C1)

Although it was reported that some families are reluctant to follow the guidelines provided from the centre to attend to the needs of their children, in general, the participants stated that the families usually engage with the school and are very grateful for the treatment, help and education received from the education professionals and the centres.

“Yes, they usually collaborate in most cases [...] moreover, they are often very grateful for the centre and all. They show respect toward the centre, us and our culture. They are collaborative people”. (Pri1)

“Yes, they are very grateful for having their children in the centre. They are very happy”. (C8)

4. Discussion

Through interviews with different educators, the results of this study help to improve the understanding of the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education, showing the formative situation of educators who are in charge of

attending to the needs of these students. Similarly, the results also help to understand the motivations of the families to migrate to Spain and the impact of these migratory phenomena on the educational centres. Moreover, the results allowed identifying both language and cultural barriers between the different agents present in this context, students and families, which may lead to biased evaluations and subjective decisions made by education professionals, resulting in the referral of students from a migrant background to special education, thereby favouring the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education [6,21,33].

Regarding the first research question, about the experience and training of teachers and specialists in special education centres, specific training on inclusive education is important for professionals who work with migrant students with special educational needs. In this sense, the experience and qualification of counsellors and SITs play a crucial role in the quality of the education that is provided to these students. However, there is a lack of specific training on attention to diversity, especially in the case of SITs. This underlines the need to invest in the professional development of educators to guarantee that they are adequately prepared to cover the needs of this group of students. Previous studies have reported this situation, highlighting the lack of training among professionals and of a clear profile that attends to the needs that are present in their context [1]. The study of Arroyo and Berzosa [28], among the main problems in educational attention to migrant students, identified that the training received by the teachers is homogeneous, without a specialised training that considers the needs and characteristics of their students, as well as the specific situation of each centre. This shows differences in the training of professionals, especially in terms of attention to diversity. In some cases, this lack of specialised training contributes to the exclusion of students from a migrant background with disabilities. In this sense, it can be asserted that the homogeneous training of educators reflects a dynamic of institutional power that does not adequately recognise the specific needs of these students. The results obtained in the present study reveal an important challenge in the education system, showing the urgent need for the competent administration and institutions to develop and implement specific actions that facilitate the training of educators in addressing the complications associated with the diversity of students from a migrant background with disabilities. Moreover, it is necessary to develop specific training in each educational centre, adapted to the real contexts and far from the homogenising propositions that come from educational administrations [27].

In regard with the second research question, which tackles the reasons for migrating and the impact of the latter on education, this study reveals that most of the migrant families from Morocco moved to Spain to find an adequate educational attention for their children with disabilities [14,43]. This shows the importance of guaranteeing that the education systems in both countries provide adequate support and resources to these students [39]. Moreover, these results highlight the need for effective collaboration between social and educational services to facilitate the successful transition of these students and their families. Thus, schools must lead this transition process toward a new context and a new education system, ensuring that both students and their families can thrive in this new environment [28]. Furthermore, this requires the participation of school associations that favour aspects such as intercultural mediation between the families and the schools.

Lastly, to address the third research question, which refers to the barriers identified between professionals and families during the schooling period of the migrant student (i.e., language and cultural barriers), the participants identified these as significant challenges in the interaction with the migrant families. Previous studies have already identified some of these barriers, such as language barriers and family–school relations [34–36,50], in line with the results of the present study. The lack of mastery of the Spanish language among some families hinders communication and mutual understanding. This underlines the need for implementing effective communication strategies, such as the use of visual tools and the participation of translators, to overcome these barriers [45,46]. In addition, the participants mentioned that the cultural barrier may influence the way in which parents interact with the education professionals and how they perceive the diagnoses and recommendations [6].

Despite the barriers identified, the interviewees pointed out that most of the migrant families show a collaborative and grateful attitude toward the school and the education professionals. This shows the value that these families attribute to the education of their children and the importance of establishing relationships of trust and respect between the schools and the families [19]. The results of previous studies are in line with those of the present work, as is the case of Santos and Lorenzo [51], who reported that, in general, the participation of Moroccan families is lower than that of other families whose mother tongue is Spanish, although they show high levels of satisfaction with the tutor.

In view of this situation, it is necessary to improve the training of professionals, in order to help them understand the language and cultural diversity of students from a migrant background. The lack of specialised professionals reflects a structural gap that must be addressed in order to guarantee a specific and effective support for migrant students with disabilities. In this sense, the demand for greater presence of trained and qualified professionals reflects the need to recognise and approach language and cultural diversity in contexts with significant migration. Considering that it is a challenge for the professionals of these centres to master all the languages of the students [6,53,54], it is fundamental to find alternatives that respond to this problem. There are experiences in which the educational community has engaged in a common project to learn the language of the students through extracurricular workshops [55]. Regarding the specialisation of teachers, it would be interesting to promote specific actions in teacher training centres (TTC) to attend to the realities of this type of centre [1,28].

The participants also demanded a greater presence of qualified professionals, especially in contexts characterised by migratory movements, as is the case presented in this study. The role of the teacher in temporary language adaptation classrooms (ATAL in Spanish) for migrant students is important for ensuring a specific attention to migrant students and their families. Therefore, a larger number of professionals of this area are required, especially in regions with a significant percentage of students from different cultures and languages [6,27,37].

The dates obtained here on the overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education in this study has also been reported in different countries other than Spain [8,33], motivated by the existence of biased evaluations and subjective decisions made by educators [1,19,20]. However, the factors that contribute to this phenomenon are complex and multifaceted, and no resolution has been developed to fully address it [6,7,19,21,45]. Therefore, it is necessary to apply an integrated approach that includes the culturally sensitive training of educators, the implementation of inclusive teaching practices, the active participations of the families and the collaboration between schools, communities and governmental agencies [6,38].

Lastly, we propose recommendations and future research lines on this topic. In this sense, the study provides a solid foundation for future work and recommendations for educational policies. It is crucial to address the divides in the training of professionals, especially for SITs, and to promote the continuous training on inclusive education and attention to diversity. Furthermore, it is fundamental to work on the development of effective strategies to overcome the language and cultural barriers, including the access to translation and cultural support services. Finally, this study underlines the importance of an inclusive approach focused on the student in education, recognising and respecting the diversity of the students, regardless of their origin or condition, as well as their educational needs [12]. This approach not only benefits migrant students with disabilities, but it also enriches the educational experience of all students and contributes to building a fairer and more inclusive society [11,13].

5. Implications and Proposals for Improvement

With regard to the main implications and propositions for improvement derived from this work, it is important to promote the participation of the educational centres with social entities that can provide services to improve the transition and adaptation of students from

a migrant background, such as academic support, language reinforcement and intercultural and leisure activities. This allows both students from a migrant background and their parents to socialise with other families [56].

Another practical recommendation to improve family integration would be to establish a mentorship programme within the educational institutions [57]. The aim is to develop a continuous feedback process of support and counselling between the minor and the mentor; the latter can be a family that had already gone through a similar situation, or a native family. This would allow attending to the needs of the migrant family in terms of integration into the education system and into society.

Finally, it would be beneficial to organise training and sensitisation sessions within the school [58,59], addressing interculturality with the entire educational community, in order to bring the different cultural realities closer and facilitate the transition and adaptation of migrant families.

6. Highlights

- The overrepresentation of students from a migrant background in special education centres is due to different factors;
- The professionals of these centres are not trained to specifically attend to migrant students;
- The lack of specialised staff to attend to non-Spanish-speaking students and families contributes to their overrepresentation in special education centres;
- The lack of specific training among professionals may result in wrong diagnoses and biased evaluations;
- Families migrate from Morocco to Spain in search of adequate and specialised educational attention for their children;
- To address overrepresentation in these centres, it is essential to guarantee the availability of support resources and promote intercultural collaboration in the education system.

7. Limitations

No project is exempt from limitations, and identifying them allows developing propositions for future research projects. The main limitations identified in the present study are related to the sample of participants. It would have been interesting to work with a larger sample of participants from different contexts. This would provide a more holistic view of the disproportionate representation of students from ethnic minorities, and it would also allow analysing the migration areas, whether they are related to their culture, closeness of the country of origin, etc. Future studies should also include the families and the students themselves, in order to analyse the barriers identified by them and how to develop plans and actions for improvement.

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