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Teacher Attitudes towards Serving Gifted Students in the Valencian Community. A Case Study

Actitud del profesorado hacia la atención al alumnado de alta capacidad. Estudio en la Comunidad Valenciana

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Summary

Research that has examined teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards the education of highly able pupils corroborates that teachers with positive attitudes support these pupils and try to meet their emotional, social and academic needs, while teachers with negative attitudes can lead to a loss of motivation, low performance and even, on occasions, a deterioration in their ability. This study aims to investigate, on the one hand, the attitudes of Valencian teachers towards highly able students and their needs by analysing their beliefs and, on the other hand, to find out the impact of the training received on these attitudes. A total of 1176 teachers from the Valencian Community took part in this research. The instrument used to carry out this research was an ad hoc questionnaire. The results indicate that teachers' attitudes towards high ability are more positive among younger teachers and those who have worked for less time. This is also true for pre-primary and primary school teachers compared to teachers at higher levels. On the other hand, the training received does not seem to have a major impact on their beliefs. Therefore, the concreteness of training should not underestimate the environmental factors, and especially the social representations, linked to the different generations.

Keywords: High ability; teacher training; attitude; inclusive education.

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Abstract

Research examining teacher attitudes while serving learners in gifted education corroborates that teachers who have a positive attitude are more likely to support their students, attempting to meet their emotional, social, and academic needs. On the contrary, teachers who respond negatively can hamper the development of key competences, resulting in loss of motivation and a poor academic performance. In this line, the present study aims to investigate the attitudes of Valencian teachers towards highly capable students-and their needs-through an analysis of their beliefs, while also determining the impact of the training received on the development of said attitudes. To achieve this, an ad-hoc questionnaire was designed and administered to a total of 1176 teachers from the Valencian Community. Results indicate that the attitude of teachers towards gifted students is more positive among younger instructors with fewer teaching experience, as well as among early years and primary school teachers in comparison with those teaching at higher levels. Furthermore, the results obtained prove that the training received does not significantly impact teacher attitudes and beliefs, thus emphasizing the need to consider environmental factors and, especially, the social representations associated to the different generations.

Keywords: Gifted education; teacher training; attitude; inclusive education.

Introduction and objectives

Teachers' attitudes towards various areas are closely related to the decisions they may take when intervening in the educational context. It is for this reason that their attitudes towards high ability will determine very directly whether or not they implement educational measures, as well as the type of measures they decide to carry out. Attitude is understood as a predisposition, existing in the subject and acquired by learning, which drives him/her to behave in a certain way in specific situations. It includes a conative (behavioural) element, an affective element (patterns of evaluation of the stimuli received) and a cognitive element (beliefs, i.e., patterns of interpretation of the stimuli in the line of anticipation of other collateral or successive stimuli) (Sabater, 1989). Research into the type of attitudes held by teachers is therefore essential. From a more sociological point of view, moreover, attitudes can be related to social representations. In this sense, these can be understood as basic, primary elements in the development of social representations and constitute the central core (Parales-Quenza and Vizcaíno-Guitiérrez, 2007).

In the cognitive domain, teachers' beliefs involve subjective theories of teaching and learning, as well as subjective theories about student characteristics that play an important role in the interaction with students in the school context (Matheis et al., 2018). They affect their behaviour, their ways of communicating and even their teaching methods (Curtis, 2005, in Kaya, 2019).

Although the way of understanding high ability has been evolving in recent years, in the field of educational research, this vision does not always have a direct impact in the classroom and on teachers, since at a social level there are still certain beliefs that hinder the implementation of new educational proposals.

cative. Over the last few decades, theories and models have been developed which, as Sternberg and Kaufman (2018) state, can be interpreted more as a continuum where new theories build on predecessors, but add additional components that reflect the state of research at that time, rather than opposing visions. In this way, we can see an evolution in the orientation of the understanding of high ability from essentialist, IQ-centred postulates and theories to a broadening of the view that takes into account non-cognitive factors, such as motivation (Renzulli, 1978, 2005, 2015; Sternberg, 2000), and contextual and socio-cultural factors (Gagné, 2015; Tannenbaum, 2000). In recent years, new models have emerged that integrate the talent development and contextual perspectives, and understand high ability as dynamic, from a developmental and contextual perspective (Dai, 2021; Subotnik et al., 2020).

Specifically, from the Mega-Model (Subotnik et al., 2020), high ability can be seen as a developmental process in which, in the early stages, potential is the key variable; in later stages, performance is the measure of high ability; and in fully developed talents eminence is the characteristic that merits this designation. "Both cognitive and psychosocial variables play an essential role in the manifestation of high ability at any stage of development, are malleable and need to be deliberately nurtured" (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 7). These authors base their model on a view of high ability as a dynamic construct, which develops over time and is not limited to high IQ. Thus, the development of talent would go through a series of stages, associated with environmental factors and psychosocial variables that would play a decisive role (Pfeiffer, 2017).

From this perspective, the authors point out that there are also psychosocial limiting factors (low motivation, unproductive ways of thinking, low level of psychological strength, poor social skills) and external or random factors (late access to the domain, lack of coincidence between interests and opportunities), which can hinder this development. Similarly, there are also enhancers, both psychosocial (optimal motivation, welcoming opportunities, productive mindsets, developed psychological strength, developed social skills) and external and random (opportunities offered in and out of school, financial resources and social and cultural capital) (Subotnik et al., 2020).

In a similar vein, Dai (2021) understands talent as a structural and functional property of the individual that develops contextually, through maturation and adaptive transactions with relevant socio-cultural environments. Talent development shows, in this sense, a constantly evolving complexity that cannot be explained from simpler, lower-level components that are part of the developmental system in question. A person's talent potential is not a fixed capacity, but will depend on environmental opportunities, resources and experiences. Environmental opportunities and challenges will lead to different patterns of effectiveness and a variety of talent development paths and trajectories. This development will be driven by endogenous and exogenous forces and will be increasingly differentiated and integrated from more bioecologically based development to a wide range of talents in culturally created domains (Dai, 2021).

From these perspectives, what matters is not whether a person is gifted or not, but rather the different trajectories of talent development, which are unique, dynamic and mediated by contextual factors (endogenous and exogenous) and by the evolution of the person him/herself throughout the life cycle. The identification of high abilities will therefore aim to address the educational needs of students through specific programmes and resources (Pfeiffer, 2017). Integrative theories (Dai, 2021; Subotnik et al., 2020) are also relevant in the field of education, since school contexts become environments that have to guide, depending on the maturity stage, towards the development of talent.

It is difficult to implement opportunities for talent development in schools if they are based on preconceived ideas, such as the fact that highly able pupils do not need special help, as they are already considered to b e sufficiently intelligent. In this sense, the teacher's idea of what a highly able child is is not one of total ignorance, but rather is related to a series of preconceived ideas about what it is to be intelligent. Sternberg's (1985) research thus suggests that people have systematic implicit theories of intelligence and that they use these implicit theories accurately both to assess themselves and to assess others. It is therefore necessary to attend to these implicit theories (Villamizar, 2011; Villamizar and Donoso, 2013). In this sense, the term high ability can be ambivalent: it has a certain positive representation (being intelligent is a good thing), but as long as it does not go beyond certain limits. Exceptionality can provoke conflicting feelings: admiration and pride on the one hand, or envy and fear on the other.

Research that has examined teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards the education of high-ability students corroborates that teachers with positive attitudes support high-ability students and try to meet their emotional, social and academic needs, while teachers with negative attitudes may lead to deterioration of ability, loss of motivation and underachievement in high-ability students (Kaya, 2019). The study by Matheis et al. (2018) showed that teachers' enjoyment in interacting with high-ability students and their confidence in teaching them is related to their beliefs towards these students.

Therefore, it is important to know the attitudes of teachers when implementing the educational response to high-ability learners to ensure that they have appropriate educational opportunities and interventions (Laine et al., 2019). Equally, this knowledge is valuable for planning teacher training, both initial and in-service.

The objectives of this study are twofold:

1. To find out teachers' attitudes towards highly able pupils and their needs through the analysis of their beliefs, in the specific field of Valencian teachers.
2. To know the impact of the training received on these attitudes.

This knowledge will undoubtedly be relevant when planning future training proposals.

Method

Population and Sample

The participants in the research are a total of 1176 teachers working in the Valencian Community, 72% of whom are women. The sample is based on a total population of 75,034 teachers and represents a confidence level of 99 error ±5. In addition, teachers of different ages participated. In this case, the classification was based on the life cycle of the teaching profession as proposed by Sikes (in Bolívar, 1998). Likewise, the different non-university educational stages and different types of centres were represented. Finally, in relation to the time worked, we have proceeded in the same way as in the classification by age. In this case, we followed the classification proposed by Huberman (1989, 1990), which establishes different stages: less than 3 years (beginning of the career, tentativeness and enthusiasm), between 4 and 6 years (stabilisation, construction of professional identity and pedagogical mastery), between 7 and 25 years (diversification and questioning, experimentation and innovation) and between 26 and 35 years (serenity, conservatism and affective distancing). The distribution of characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

Features	n	%
Gender		
Female	852	72%
Male	323	28%
Another	1	0%
Age		
21 to 28 years old	48	4%
29 to 33 years old	102	9%
34 to 40 years old	226	19%
41 to 55 years old	587	50%
Over 56 years old	214	18%
Educational stage		
Infant-Primary	490	42%
Secondary	578	49%
FP	93	8%
Different stages	15	1%

Features	n	%
Type of centre		
Public	1020	87%
Agreed	143	12%
Private	14	1%
Years worked		
Less than 3 years	115	10%
Between 4 and 6 years old	129	11%
Between 7 and 25 years old	678	57%
Between 26 and 35 years old	255	22%

Another aspect that has been taken into account, because it is considered that it may influence the analysis of attitudes and beliefs, is the fact of having received or not training in the field of high ability, both in terms of initial and in-service training. On the other hand, it should be noted that 28% of the participating teachers have neither received initial nor in-service training. This distribution is specified in Table 2.

Table 2.

Initial and continuous training of participants.

	Features	n	%
Initial training	No	836	71%
	Yes	318	27%
	Don't know	23	2%
Lifelong learning	No	412	35%
	Yes	764	65%

Finally, the fact of having received training does not always imply feeling prepared to work with highly able pupils. Thus, 406 teachers reported feeling unprepared and 480 unprepared (75% of the total) when dealing with highly able pupils, compared to 231 who said they felt prepared and 60 who felt very prepared. These data contrast with the percentage of teachers who say that they have been trained, either through initial training or in-service training (72%).

In relation to initial training, and in a complementary manner, the syllabuses of Valencian universities for the Bachelor's Degree in Teaching and the Master's Degree in Secondary Education Teaching were analysed, where a lack of content related to training in high abilities was evident. In relation to lifelong learning

Participants were asked for information on the type of training they had received, with the most common type of training being through the teacher training centre, as can be seen in Figure 1:

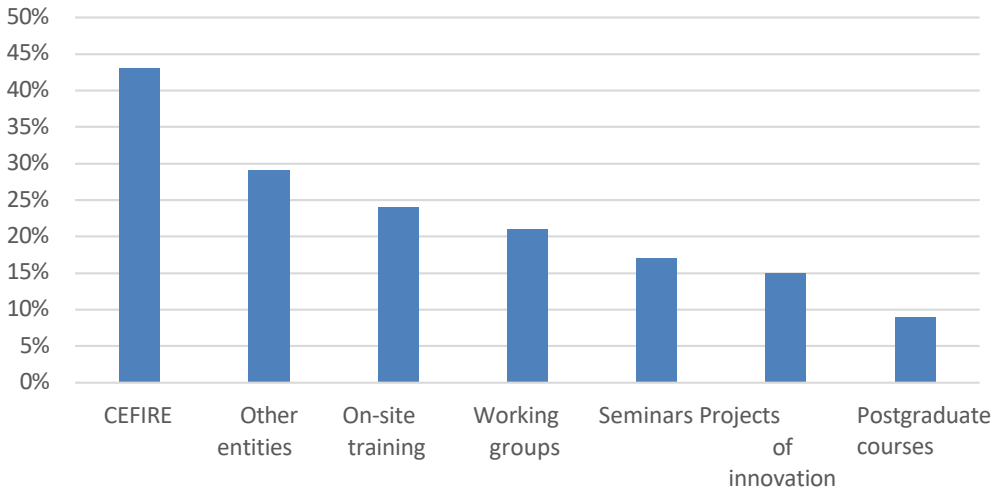

Figure 1. Most common forms of continuing training.

On the other hand, participants were also asked if they had had any highly able students during their professional career, and if they had any family members or close relatives with high abilities, as both situations can be a way of getting to know them. The answers can be found in table 3:

Table 3.

Knowledge about high ability students.

Features	Yes	%	No	%	Don't know/no answer	%
Has had high ability students	797	68%	226	19%	154	13%
I have relatives/acquaintances with high capacity	424	36%	579	43%	173	15%

As can be seen, it is more common for teachers to learn about the reality of high ability through having had students in the classroom than through family members and acquaintances.

Instrument

The instrument used to carry out this research was an *ad hoc* questionnaire. The steps for its construction began with a review of the literature and the collection of statements from people linked to the field of education of people with high abilities (21 teachers and family members). From this first phase, we proceeded to draft the items, which have been distributed into five dimensions: socio-demographic data (8 items), knowledge of high ability (11 items), attitudes and beliefs (4 items), knowledge of legislation (1 item) and educational response (17 items), as can be seen in table 4. This article focuses on dimension 3, centred on attitudes and beliefs. For each dimension we have specified the variables or factors that we intended to measure.

Table 4.

Instrument dimensions.

Data	Dimensions/Factors	Items
Socio-demographic data	Sex	1.1.
	Age	1.2.
	Educational level	1.3.
	Type of centre	1.4.
	Years of work	1.5.
	Training for high capacities	1.6.
2. Knowledge about the student body of high capacities	Identification (detection)	2.1. a 2.3.
	Conceptualisation	2.4.
3. Attitude of teachers	Beliefs and attitudes	3.1.
4. Knowledge of legislation	Knowledge	4.1.
5. Educational response	Level I	5.1. a 5.6.
	Level II	5.7. a 5.9.
	Level III	5.10. a 5.11.
	Level IV	5.12. a 5.13.
	Environment	5.14.
	Family	5.15.
	Difficulties	5.16.
	Facilities	5.17.

Once the items and the different response options had been drafted, their validation by judges began. In this sense, their content has been validated (construct validation) by a group of experts in the subject, according to the following criteria

relevance, clarity, sufficiency and coherence (logical validation). Thus, the level of agreement between the experts was analysed using Kendall's coefficient of agreement (W). On the basis of the results, the appropriate modifications were made. Table 5 shows the degree of agreement for the entire questionnaire.

Table 5.

Concordance analysis.

Contrast statistics	
N	9
W for Kendall	.194
Chi-square	487,587
gl	279
Sig. asymptot.	.001
As α=0.05>p-value=0.001 we can reject $_{Ho.}$ Therefore, there is agreement between the judges for the whole questionnaire.	

The pilot test was then applied in order to analyse the reliability of the instrument, i.e. its internal consistency, by means of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results of this analysis are presented in table 6 (for questions with a Likert scale structure) and table 7 (for questions with a yes/no/don't know structure).

Table 6.

Reliability analysis of Likert scale questions.

Reliability statistics	
Cronbach's alpha	N of items
,701	25

Table 7.

Reliability analysis yes/no/don't know questions.

Reliability statistics	
Cronbach's alpha	N of items
,836	27

A total of 105 teachers (84 women and 21 men) took part in the pilot project, covering the different age groups, the different types of school and the different educational stages stipulated. Finally, the final drafting has been carried out.

Data collection and analysis procedure

The questionnaire was sent to all educational centres in the Valencian Community through their institutional mail, together with a letter explaining the aims of the research. It was informed that the answers provided would be kept in the strictest confidence and confidentiality and would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

We have tried to keep the sample as large as possible to ensure maximum representativeness. In addition, we tried to ensure that all the quotas analysed in the research were represented, and to this end we also contacted various professionals who facilitated contact with people linked to the least represented quotas (using the snowball technique), with the intention of ensuring that all quotas were represented, including those to which we had initially had less access, such as teachers in private schools. All teachers were included, not only those who had had a relationship with highly able students, as it was important to know the real educational response that highly able students were receiving.

A descriptive-inferential analysis of the data collected was carried out using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 26.0. For the descriptive part, the intention was to find out the teachers' attitudes towards caring for highly able pupils (to make a diagnosis of the situation). The values used were the mean and standard deviation, as well as the elaboration of graphs with percentages.

For the inferential part, a correlational analysis of the data was carried out by comparing them with the socio-demographic variables and with the fact of having received or not received training (initial or continuous) on this subject, using the Kuskal-Wallis test. This comparison was made on the basis of a non-parametric test, as it was found that the samples did not comply with normality.

Results

The aim of this study was to analyse teachers' attitudes towards highly able pupils. For this reason, 4 items have been proposed which are related to the main beliefs that make it difficult for these pupils to receive the educational attention they require (there are pupils who need more attention than them, it is better not to make them visible, they are an additional problem, or their attention is elitist). Figure 2 below shows the results for the four questions mentioned above, taking into account that answer 1 (R1) is equivalent to not agree at all, answer 2 (R2) to slightly agree, answer 3 (R3) to agree and answer 4 (R4) to strongly agree:

a. Having highly able pupils is an added problem.

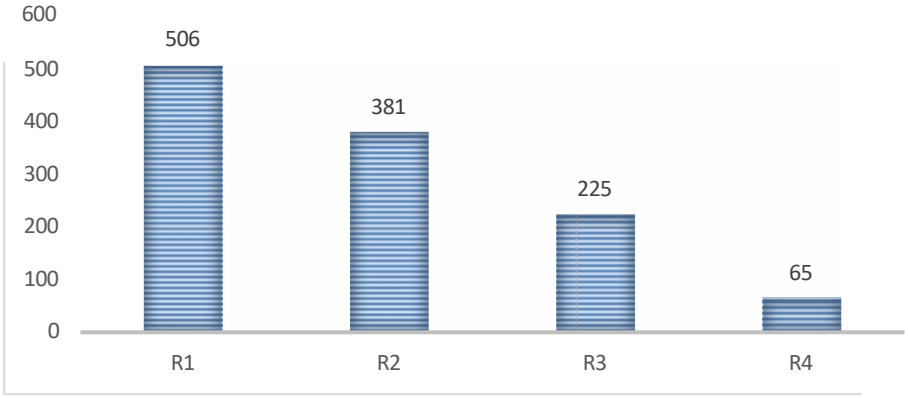

Figure 2. Responses to question a.

Table 8.

Statistics question a.

Average	1,871707732
Standard Deviation	0,908577023

If we look at the percentages shown in Figure 3, we can see that 75% of the teaching staff either do not agree or do not agree at all with this statement, while 25% do consider this type of pupils to be an additional problem for their work.

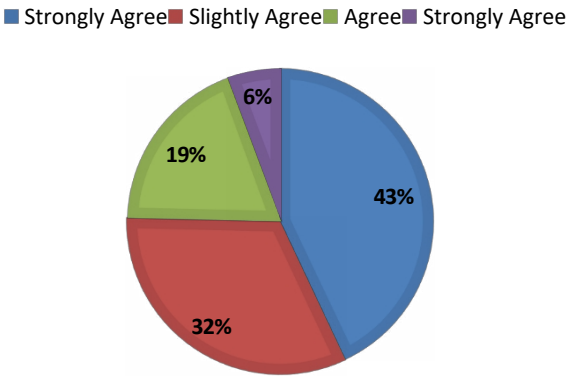

Figure 3. Question a graph

b. Students with specific learning needs require more support than highly able students.

Figure 4 shows the results under this item.

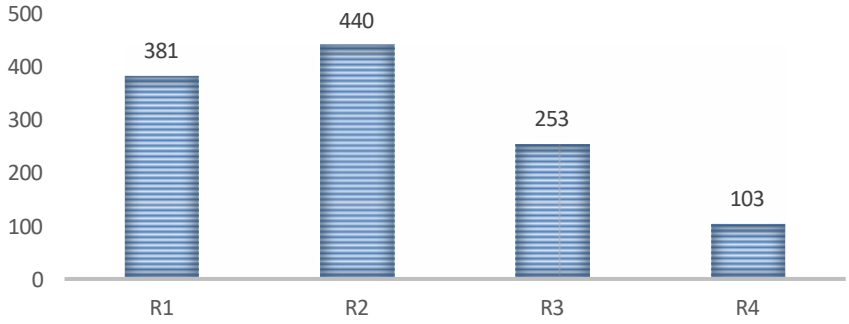

Figure 4. Responses to question b

Table 9.

Statistics question b

Media	2,066270178
Standard Deviation	0,940376706

If we analyse the data in terms of percentages, shown in figure 5, we find that most teachers do not agree or strongly agree with this statement (69%), even so, there is a third who agree or strongly agree (31%). It should be borne in mind that, according to current legislation, highly able pupils are pupils with specific educational support needs, just like pupils with learning difficulties.

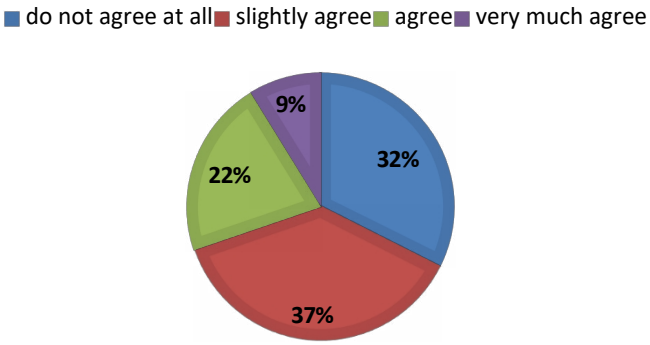

Figure 5. Graph question b

b. Students identified as highly able have more difficulties in making friends.
c. Figure 6 shows the results for this item.

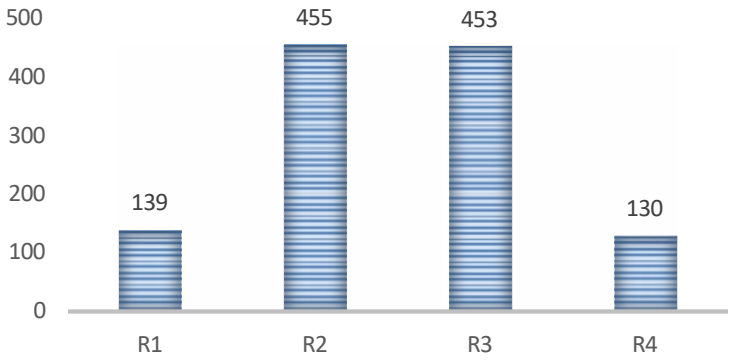

Figure 6. Responses to question c

Table 10.

Statistics question c.

Media	2,487680544
Standard Deviation	0,840798750

There is often a refusal among teachers to make highly able pupils visible. One of the arguments is precisely this. If we look at the result by percentages, shown in Figure 7, we can see that the responses are quite polarised, although the majority are in the middle (agree and slightly agree). However, there is still a significant proportion of teachers who consider that it can make relationships difficult for them (49%).

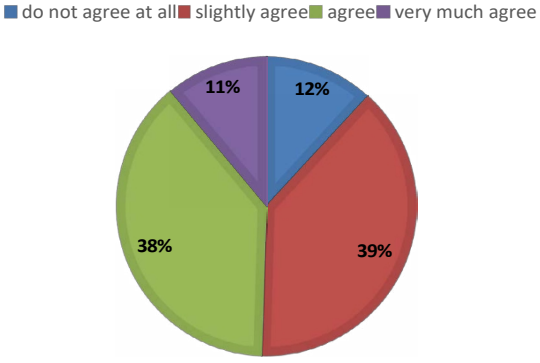

Figure 7. Graph question c.

d. Differentiated attention for highly able students violates the principle of equal opportunities.

Figure 8 shows the results collected for this item.

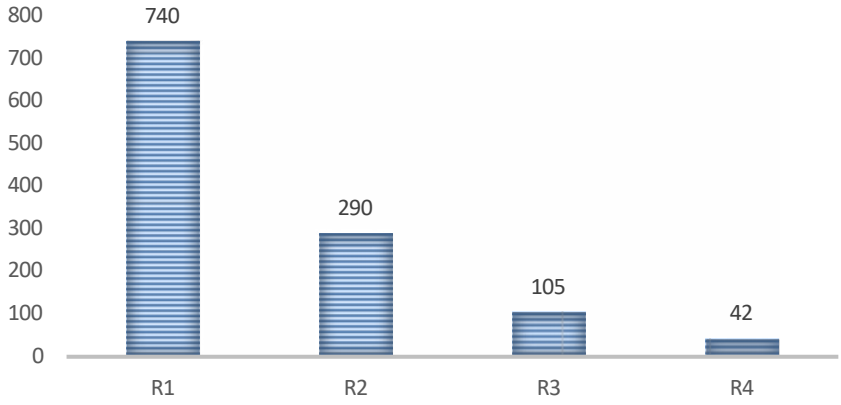

Figure 8. Responses to question d

Table 11.

Statistics question d.

Average	1,531860663
Standard Deviation	0,800942109

According to the data shown in Figure 9 in this case, there is a clear majority of the teaching staff who agree or strongly disagree with this statement (88%). Even so, it is striking that there are still teachers who agree or strongly agree (12%).

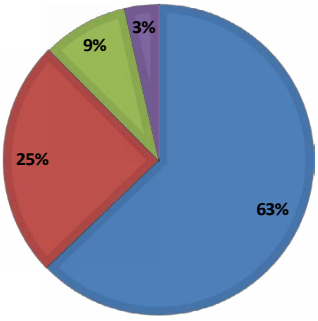

Figure 9. Graph question d

Regarding the inferential analysis, a significant correlation was found between some of the responses on teachers' beliefs about educational care for highly able pupils and the variables gender, age, educational stage, type of school and years worked, but not with respect to the variable training received.

In relation to the gender variable, there is a significant relationship between gender and the consideration that students with specific learning needs need more help than students with high ability only, as can be seen i n table 12. Thus, males are more in agreement with this idea (34%) than females (29%).

Table 12.

Sex variable.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,926	,017	,234	,314
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: gender				

In relation to the age variable, there are significant differences, as shown in table 13, in relation to the following items:

a) High ability students pose an additional problem in class: 34% agree/strongly agree in the 56+ age group, 25% in the 41-55 age group, 22% in the 34-40 age group, 20% in the 29-33 age group and 10% in the younger age group (21-28).
b) Pupils with specific learning needs need more help than highly able pupils: here too, the older age group (56+) is the one which agrees or strongly agrees with this statement (44%), compared to 29% of the 41-55 age group, 25% of the 29-33 age group, 24% of the 34-40 age group and, lastly, 21% of the youngest age group (21-28).
c) And differentiated care undermines the principle of equal opportunities, where it is the group characterised by energy, commitment and involvement (34 to 40 years old) that most agree or strongly agree with this statement (17%). This is followed by the younger age group (21-28 years) with 13% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing, the 41-55 age group (11%), the 56+ age group (10%) and finally the 29-33 age group (stage of personal urgency) with 7% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing.

It seems that it is the older age group that is more prejudiced towards the care of these pupils.

Table 13.

Age variable.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,001	,000	,220	,025
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: age				

With regard to the stage of education, teachers of vocational training are those who agree most with the idea that having highly able pupils is an additional problem (a): 34% of participants at this level agree or strongly agree with this statement, followed by 30% in the case of secondary teachers, 22% in the case of primary teachers and 12% in the case of pre-primary teachers, who are the ones who disagree the most. Teachers of ESO and baccalaureate (40%) are also more in agreement with the idea that students with specific learning needs need more help than those with high abilities (b), followed by those of vocational training (33%), and on the other hand, teachers of pre-primary (23%), and lastly, those of primary (20% agree or strongly agree). On the other hand, infant education teachers are the ones who agree most with the idea that differentiated attention to highly able pupils goes against the principle of equal opportunities (d), as shown by the fact that 25% of these teachers agree or strongly agree, followed by those in primary education (14%), ESO and Bachillerato (12%) and, lastly, at the other extreme, those in vocational training (7%). The contrast statistics are presented in table 14.

Table 14.

Educational level variable.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,000	,000	,343	,031
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: educational attainment				

In relation to the type of school, it is the teachers in private schools who most significantly state that a highly able pupil in class is an additional problem (a): 36% agree or strongly agree with this statement.

In contrast, 25% of respondents in public schools and 21% in state-subsidised schools expressed the same idea. The contrast statistics can be seen in table 15.

Table 15.

Variable type of centre.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,027	,147	,777	,882
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: type of centre				

In relation to the number of years of work, there is a significant difference in the responses according to the number of years of work in teaching, as can be seen in Table 16. Thus, those who have been working the longest (between 26 and 35 years) are the ones who say they agree most with the fact that having highly able pupils is an added problem (a): 33%, compared to those who have been working for less than 3 years (26%), those who have been working for between 7 and 25 years (22%) and those who have been working for between 4 and 6 years (21%). Also with the consideration that students with specific learning needs need more help than high ability students (b): 42% agree or strongly agree in the case of those who have been working for between 26 and 35 years, followed by those who have been working for less than 3 years (32%), those who have been working for between 7 and 25 years (27%) and those who have been working for between 4 and 6 years (25%). And with the statement that students identified as highly able have more difficulties in making friends (c): once again, it is those who have been working for more years (between 26 and 35) who agree or strongly agree with this statement (58%), followed by those who have been working for less than 3 years (50%), those who have been working for between 7 and 25 years (48%) and finally those who have been working for between 4 and 6 years (42%). It should also be noted that the group that agrees most with these statements, in second place, is the group that has been working for less than 3 years. Therefore, it is the teachers who are in the stabilisation stage (between 4 and 6 years) and the diversification and questioning stage (between 7 and 25) who seem to have a more positive attitude towards these pupils.

Table 16.

Variable years of work.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,003	,000	,027	,107
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: years Work				

Finally, the relationship between teachers' responses and whether or not they are trained was analysed. To this end, four categories were established, as shown in table 17, in order to make the relevant comparisons:

Table 17.

Training received.

1	YES initial training, YES continuous training
2	YES initial training, NO further training
3	NO initial training, YES continuous training
4	NO initial training, NO further training

In this case, as can be seen in table 18, no significant differences were found on the basis of any of the groups relating to the training received.

Table 18.

Variable training received.

Contrast statisticsa,b				
	a	b	c	d
Sig. asymptot.	,169	,485	, 449	,373
a. Kruskal-Wallis test				
b. Grouping variable: training received				

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this research was to analyse the attitudes of Valencian teachers towards high ability, taking into account the influence that these attitudes have on behaviour and, in this case, on the educational attention provided to high ability students, as well as their relationship with the training received.

In relation to the first question raised, we can observe that, far from seeing an opportunity in these children, there is still a quarter of teachers who see them as just another problem and, therefore, will find it difficult to implement measures in the classroom. This idea is often based on an equalisation orientation. However, from an inclusive education perspective, diversity is understood as inherent to human beings, so education should be based on respect for different profiles and not on the search for homogeneity. On the other hand, the idea that there are pupils who need more help than highly able pupils is present in one third of Valencian teachers.

Thus, 31% of the participants in this research agree that students with learning difficulties require more attention than those with learning difficulties, when current legislation (Echeita, 2021) establishes that both groups require educational support. Apart from this, the orientation towards an inclusive school present in our legislation understands that it is necessary to value difference as an enriching opportunity and that education must guarantee the presence, participation and learning of all pupils, including those with high abilities.

On the other hand, 49% of teachers state that these pupils will have greater difficulties in making friends if they are identified as high ability. This idea can have a direct impact on the students themselves (Pygmalion effect). Freeman (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of high ability students over 35 years. The author notes that students labelled as more able were treated differently by families and teachers than students who were equally able but not labelled as such. They were consciously or unconsciously recipients of attitudes and expectations, and most did their best to meet them (Freeman, 2015). The identification of highly able learners should not be used to label them, as the label can be very harmful depending on how it is conceptualised. Identification is important in order to adjust the educational response, and to define the profile of needs, but never to put pressure or stereotypes on them. Freeman (2015) notes from her study that unlabelled but equally able learners suffered less, because they were more likely to be accepted as whole human beings, rather than as learning machines.

In addition, the idea that the identification of high ability students may be related to problems at the social level is compatible with the disharmony hypothesis. People who base their beliefs on this hypothesis perceive intelligence in a positive way, but combine it with a perception of low social, emotional and behavioural competence. In research conducted by Matheis et al. (2018), prospective teachers' beliefs about high-ability students compared to average-ability students and their motivation (enthusiasm and self-efficacy) were analysed. The results provide an ambivalent picture, but consistent with this hypothesis. This research also found that teachers' enjoyment of interacting with high-ability students and their confidence in teaching them is related to their beliefs towards these students. Thus, enthusiasm and perceived self-efficacy decrease with high mismatch scores, while high intelligence scores have positive effects.

While high intelligence becomes a key characteristic of high-ability students, they and average-ability students do not differ systematically in their social, emotional and adaptive skills (Matheis et al., 2018). In fact, empirical research findings do not support behaviour as a characteristic of high-ability students. Also Freeman (2015) points out in this regard that the assumption that intellectually more able children have more emotional problems than others is an unjustifiable and dangerous stereotype.

The results obtained in this research also show that most teachers do not consider that catering for highly able pupils is contrary to the principle of equal opportunities (only 12% agree with this statement). Rather, current legislation argues that in order to guarantee equal opportunities, highly able pupils should receive a different educational response to the ordinary one, taking into account their specific educational support needs (LOMLOE, 2020). On the other hand, it is worth noting that the teachers who are least inclined to differentiation are those in pre-primary education (where the diversity of students is probably most evident), as well as those in the 34-40 age group, while those in the 29-33 age group are the ones who most clearly agree that catering for these students does not violate the principle of equal opportunities. In the Finnish context, Laine et al. (2019) noted that, overall, teachers' attitudes towards the educational provision for highly able students were slightly positive, considering that they required specific attention. They appeared to support differentiation as an educational response, in contrast to acceleration or tiering. However, despite strong support for differentiated education as a support measure for highly able students, teachers' attitudes towards the practice were more sceptical.

Although it would seem to be expected that having received training on the subject would generate more positive attitudes towards highly able students and their educational care among teachers, the results of this research seem to indicate that its impact is not significant, in contrast to other research (Tourón et al. 2002; Gómez-Labrado et al., 2021). We can affirm, in this sense, that the influence of beliefs at the social level, related to the different generations, has a greater impact than the fact of having received training or not.

Thus, as our research shows, there seem to be more negative attitudes towards the educational care of highly able pupils among older teachers. They show greater agreement with the following statements: highly able pupils are an additional problem in class (a), pupils with learning needs require more help than highly able pupils (b) and differentiated attention to highly able pupils violates the principle of equal opportunities (d). The responses are similar in relation to the number of years worked. Thus, those who have been working the longest (between 26 and 35 years) are the ones who mostly agree with the fact that having a highly able pupil means extra work (a), that pupils with special learning needs need more help than they do (b), that pupils with special learning needs need more help than those with special needs (c), and that the differentiated attention to highly able pupils is a violation of the principle of equal opportunities (d).
(b) and that students identified as highly able have more difficulties in making friends (c). It should also be noted that the group that agrees most with these statements, in second place, is the group that has been working for less than 3 years. Therefore, it is the teachers in the stabilisation stage (between 4 and 6 years) and the diversification and questioning stage (between 7 and 25 years) who seem to have a more positive attitude towards these pupils.

In this sense, there are studies that also point to an impact of age on beliefs regarding educational inclusion and high ability. For example,

in the case of Plata et al. (2021), age becomes a variable that influences aspects related to educational inclusion, so that the younger their years of experience in the workplace, the better their attitude towards inclusion, although in this case older and more experienced people showed less rejection and valued highly able pupils more highly.

The research conducted by Kaya (2019) in the Turkish setting obtains very similar results to those of our research. Their results show that there are no significant differences according to the scores obtained in all the subscales of the attitude scale and the total score, between the variables seniority, having a gifted student and qualified teachers. Significant differences were found for the variables gender, age and type of school, according to some sub-dimensions. Research by McCoach et al. (2007) also suggested that training or experience in educating gifted students was not indicative of more positive attitudes towards gifted students. These authors had predicted that teachers who had received some training in high ability would have more positive attitudes towards high ability students.

The authors further note that previous research on the effects of high-ability training has been mixed. For example, Bégin and Gagné's (1994) review of research (in MacCoach et al., 2007) identified eight studies that examined the relationship between high ability training and attitudes towards high ability. Five of the eight studies found a statistically significant relationship; three of the eight did not. Another disturbing aspect of this research was that teachers who received training in high ability had higher self-perceptions of themselves as gifted, but did not have higher attitudes towards gifted education (McCoach et al., 2007).

In short, we can affirm, on the basis of the beliefs analysed, that teachers' attitudes towards high ability in the Valencian context are more positive among younger teachers and those who have worked for less time. These results have relevant implications, as it seems that among younger teachers there is a hopeful path ahead, with a more positive attitude towards highly able pupils, which is directly linked to educational opportunities and the educational response.

On the other hand, the training received does not seem to have a great impact. This is why, as a future perspective, it is considered that training should not underestimate environmental factors, and especially social representations, linked to the different generations. This training should be based on a more proactive guideline, overcoming the deficit-focused orientation of the current education system and reorienting the educational logic towards the development of the talent of all students. An education system that understands that students are diverse and learn in different ways must be flexible and seek the maximum development of their potential, and not equalisation. For this reason, teacher training should address both up-to-date knowledge in the field of high ability, as well as awareness of the reality of these pupils and orientation towards educational practice. In short, it is a question of combining three fundamental aspects of the human being: cognition, emotion and action.

Finally, with regard to the limits of the present research, it should be noted that the data collected are limited to a specific territory, and although this may favour greater contextualisation, it would be necessary to extend the results with further studies in other communities and other countries, especially to see if this trend towards a better attitude of teachers towards high ability develops in other contexts. On the other hand, another limitation of the study is that it focuses on a quantitative view, since, although it allows access to a larger number of participants, it reduces the possibility of delving more deeply into teachers' beliefs and even into the discourses that convey them.

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