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Inclusive education in the Dominican Republic: teachers' perceptions of and practices towards students with diverse learning needs

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Introduction: Students with diverse learning needs, particularly those with disabilities or identified as overaged, face significant challenges within the Dominican Republic's education system. Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education to promote inclusion, these learners often have limited access to quality pedagogical support. This is further confounded by the fact that there is a paucity of research examining how teachers perceive and interact with these learners.

Methods: This ethnographic study draws on diverse methods, including observations and interviews, to investigate teachers' perceptions of inclusion in two public schools and how these perceptions shaped their pedagogical practices.

Results: The authors illuminate how teachers' perceptions of their students, their schools, and their classroom environments influence their commitment to facilitating student learning, irrespective of student age or ability.

Discussion: The findings contribute valuable insights to inform strategies for enhancing inclusive education in the Dominican Republic. Recommendations for policy and teacher training are provided, and the importance of conducting research with teachers is explained.

KEYWORDS

inclusive education, Latin America and the Caribbean, teachers' perceptions, pedagogy, ethnography, disability, Dominican Republic

Highlights

- This ethnographic study draws on diverse methods, including formal and informal observations and interviews with teachers, to explore their perceptions and practices related to inclusive education.
- Teachers often described overage students through a deficit lens, in terms of their misbehaviour or disinterest in school. Students with disabilities were nearly invisible in the study, due to a lack of data or health assessments, and teachers described these students as needing "special" external support.
- Teachers' perceptions shape their practice, often resorting only to classroom management strategies, or shifting responsibility to external actors.
- These perceptions change, however, as teachers get to know their students and their home lives. They develop a deeper understanding of students' cultural, psychosocial, or cognitive needs, and seem to become more empathetic towards students.
- These findings point to the importance of building school-community partnerships and ensuring teachers work together with families and other child protection institutes.
- Teachers also need to be supported with training, pedagogical skills, and a conducive classroom and school environment that supports inclusion for all students.

1 Introduction

The inclusion of all young people, regardless of their abilities, is a fundamental aspect of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). While SDG4 has been seen as a major commitment of governments in the Global South, there has been varying levels of progress in terms of national policy design and implementation. This article focuses on the Dominican Republic, a country which – prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – had some of the highest rates of economic productivity in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, yet low levels of learning and high levels of educational inequality across groups of students (World Bank, 2016). Over the past thirty years, the Dominican Republic Ministry of Education (MINERD), government bodies, and civil society organizations have demonstrated a growing commitment to universal access to education and increased attention to educational quality (Hamm-Rodríguez and Veras Diaz, 2021).

Yet access to education and quality learning still remains a privilege reserved for few students, and inequities based on gender, socio-economic level, and disability, hamper progress towards SDG4. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, just over 1 in 5 students (21 percent) in the Dominican Republic finished lower-secondary level having met minimum proficiency level in reading, with girls (26 percent) more likely to do so than boys (16 percent); and fewer than 1 in 10 students (9 percent) achieved a minimum proficiency level in mathematics by the end of lower secondary level (with similar rates across sexes) (UNESCO-UIS, 2018). The Dominican Republic performs poorly on international and regional comparative exams (UNESCO, 2013; OECD, 2016, 2019). Further, low retention and completion rates for students point to significant inequalities within the education system. Although net enrolment rates at the primary level have increased from 84 percent in 1999 to 93 percent in 2018 (UNESCO-UIS, 2022), these figures drop dramatically at the secondary level. At the secondary level, 17% of youth ages 14–17 years old are out of school, and amongst the poorest quintile, 30% of school-age adolescents are not enrolled (FHI360, 2018). Boys are also more likely to be out of school or repeat grades (FHI360, 2018). Other students who are more at risk of dropping out or repeating grades include students from rural communities or households of lower socioeconomic levels, and children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO-UIS, 2022).

This paper focuses on the experiences of students with disabilities and overage students who have repeated grades. It targets the fifth and sixth-grade levels, or last two years of primary school, which at the time of data collection formed a transition period in which Dominican students commonly dropped out of the school system (MINERD, 2016). In particular, this article aims to understand teachers' perceptions and practices in relation to these two groups of students who remain at the margins of the Dominican education system. We use the term "students with diverse learning needs" to refer to overaged students, students with disabilities, or students with special educational needs, in line with the terminology used in the official documents.

1.1 *Sobreedad* students and children with disabilities

In the Dominican Republic (DR), a student is considered overage (*sobreedad*) when they are at least two years older than the required age for their grade [National Education Council (NEC), 2001]. During the 2017-2018 school year, the rate of *sobreedad* in Dominican public schools was 7.5 percent at the primary level and 12 percent at the secondary level (MINERD, 2019). This means more than one in ten secondary-age students were not studying at a grade level appropriate for their age even before COVID-19. National statistics suggest that the *sobreedad* experience is shaped by socio-economic level, household location and gender. There are twice as many overage boys as there are girls at both the primary and secondary levels (MINERD, 2019). Further, students from poor or rural households are some of the most at risk of repeating grades. They more commonly perform poorly on national exams (MINERD, 2019), and students who fail their exams may be immediately held back, increasing their risk of being overage (World Bank, 2019). Overage students are also more likely to drop out of school, and this risk magnifies as their age difference with their peers increases (Fiszbein et al., 2015; World Bank, 2019).

Students with disabilities comprise another vulnerable group. A UNICEF (2017) report found that more than one in five children (21 percent) aged 6–11 years with disabilities do not attend school. Further, approximately 70 percent of those who drop out report doing so because of their disability (ONE, UNICEF, and O&MED, 2019). On average, just 68 percent of students with disabilities complete primary education, compared to 83 percent of their peers without disabilities (Disability Data Portal, 2022). Young people with disabilities are also less likely to develop critical skills needed for success in school and society. Nearly half of children (ages 6–11) with disabilities in the country do not know how to read or write; and 35 percent of adolescents (12-17-year-olds) with disabilities have not acquired basic literacy skills (UNICEF, 2017). The literacy rate for persons 15-years and older is 90 percent for those without disabilities and less than 78 percent for those with disabilities (UNESCO-UIS, 2018). Students with disabilities who do not develop basic skills necessary to succeed in school, are more likely to drop out of school prematurely (ONE, UNICEF, and O&MED, 2019). Additional challenges include inaccessible school infrastructure, or the lack of trained teachers, as well as negative attitudes, stigma and discrimination (ONE, UNICEF, and O&MED, 2019; Rouhani et al., 2023).

2 Inclusive educational policy in the DR

International mandates and policy proclamations have sparked changes at the national level in the Dominican Republic. Starting in the mid-1900s, educational policy was primarily grounded in the medical model of disability and students with disabilities were often segregated in special schools. Schools were built for students with visual impairments (1957), motor impairments (1963) and auditory impairments (1969) (DEE-MINERD, 2017). Other students with diverse learning needs were allowed to attend mainstream schools but were taught separately in "pedagogical recovery classrooms." Students were assigned these classrooms without carrying out psycho-pedagogical evaluations, without specialized trained personnel, and above all, in an approach that stigmatized them through a process of labelling (DEE-MINERD, 2017). In 1998, Departmental Order 07-98 eliminated the use of pedagogical recovery classrooms and mandated schools to evaluate all students so that they could later be reintegrated into their corresponding grades, based on their age level. The new legislation also established Special Education centres for students with

TABLE 1 Laws and policies addressing education of children with diverse learning needs.

Name of law or policy	Year	Description
General education act	1997	Regulates Dominican education system; promotes equal learning opportunities and equitable delivery of educational services
Departmental order 07	1998	Established accelerated learning for *sobreedad* students; eliminated pedagogical recovery classrooms to attend to learning diversity
Departmental order 18	2001	Authorized the reorganization of special education centres for learners with disabilities and diverse educational needs
Departmental order 05	2002	Changed the National School of the Blind to Resource Centres for children and adolescents with visual disabilities
Departmental order 24	2003	Established national guidelines for inclusive education
Code 136–03 protection of children and adolescents	2003	Guarantees the right to education for all learners, free of any type of discrimination
Ten-year education plan	2008–2018	Contains ten key policies to impulse transformation of the education system and to make it more "accessible, inclusive, democratic, and efficient" (MINERD, 2016: p.35).
Departmental order 03	2008	Replaced Departmental Order 24; supports mainstream schools in responding to learning diversity through inclusive education; mandates all learners with SEN to attend mainstream schools from early childhood, regardless of whether they have disability
General act on disability	2013	Mandates early and basic education as compulsory for learners with disabilities, in mainstream schools; decrees special education centres will receive students whose disabilities prevent them from attending mainstream schools
Competency-based curriculum	2016	Promotes skills-based approach to teaching-learning; emphasises inclusion and equity; presents Special Education as subsystem
Strategic plan 2017–2020	2017–2020	Guarantees "an inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all" (National Education Council and MINERD, 2018: p. 22), especially for vulnerable learners and through the National Plan for the Reduction of *Sobreedad.*
Department order No. 04	2018	Students in mainstream schools to receive psychoeducational support from staff in Special Education Centres or CADs

Sources: adapted from UNESCO (n.d.) and DEE-MINERD (2017).

multiple disabilities or developmental delays requiring accommodations across curricular subjects.

As part of its commitment to fulfil the right to inclusive education enshrined in the 1997 General Education Act, the Dominican government passed numerous laws and policies that directly impact the education of persons with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities and overaged students (see Table 1). In 2003, the Dominican Republic Ministry of Education launched its first inclusive education policy, which built off the ratification of the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, the 2000 World Education Forum's Dakar framework, *Education for All,* the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. In 2001 the National Plan for the Reduction of *Sobreedad* (referring to "overage" students) was launched; and in 2004, the Programme for Strengthening Attention to Diversity and Expanding Special Education Services (PADEE for its name in Spanish) started with the support of the Spanish government. The programme employed three strategic lines of action: institutional strengthening, Special Education Centres, and Resource Centres for Attention to Diversity (CAD) (PADEE, OCI, and CAD, 2008, cited in DEE-MINERD, 2017). The establishment of CADs aimed to promote whole-school improvement processes and the development of inclusive education through teacher and administrator training, and guidance to families for those students with diverse learning needs in mainstream schools (Pérez Jiménez, 2008). This marked an important milestone in inclusive educational policy in the Dominican Republic, as it shifted the political agenda from supporting students with "special education needs" to supporting all students, in all their diversity (DEE-MINERD, 2017).

The 2008 Departmental Order No. 03 defines inclusive education as it is known in the country today, as "achieving full participation and learning for all children, whatever their social, cultural and individual status, through education that responds to all students' diverse educational needs" (Education Secretary of State, 2008: p.4). It also describes "special educational needs" (SEN) as "the support and resources to be provided to certain children and young people who, for various reasons – which may be personal, social, economic, cultural, academic, among others – face barriers to their learning process and participation in school" (*ibid*: p.5). This renewed inclusive education policy placed responsibility on the school, and school community – including teachers, school leaders, parents, and families – to support students with diverse learning needs. Article 2 indicated a shift from segregation in special schools, to the full inclusion of all students in mainstream schools, while Article 3 clarified that only students with "profound and multiple disabilities" were to attend Special Education Centres.

As indicated in Table 1, various other developments have taken place at the policy level. In recent past, Strategic Plan 2017–2020, known as the "Educational Revolution" (*Revolución Educativa*) was launched to "guarantee an inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all" (National Education Council and MINERD, 2018: p.22), especially for vulnerable students. Within this strategy, the government plans to improve primary school completion rates and reduce dropout, repetition, and *sobreedad* rates, including by expanding the National Plan for the Reduction of *Sobreedad.* Despite these policy efforts, data regarding school access, dropout rates, and the academic achievement of young people with disabilities and diverse learning needs in the Dominican Republic indicate few advancements towards inclusive education over the years (Jovine, 2017; ONE, UNICEF, and O&MED, 2019). It is within this context that this research was conducted.

3 From policy to practice: research on implementing inclusive education

While there is limited research on the practice of inclusive education in the Dominican Republic, that which does exist points to several key challenges hindering policy implementation. Barriers to addressing equity and inclusion include the historically low investment in education (albeit an upward trend over the years) (Jovine, 2017), unequal distribution of resources across geographies, socio-economic levels, and ethno-racial divides (Hamm-Rodríguez and Veras Diaz, 2021), and limited teacher education and training that focuses on inclusion of the most marginalized (Jovine, 2017). To meet the SDGs in the Dominican Republic, Jovine (2017) highlights a particular need to strengthen institutional capacity, increase the hiring of qualified personnel, especially teachers, and increase budgetary resources targeted at initiatives for vulnerable students.

At the school and classroom levels, challenges are revealed in teaching and learning environments that are inconducive to teaching for diversity, as well as discriminatory attitudes of teachers and other education personnel. Velásquez (2020), for example, argues that the high pupil-to-teacher ratio is a particular barrier for supporting students from lower socio-economic levels, who are more likely to repeat grades, and who receive limited support from parents or caregivers at home, and thus require more tailored support and individualized attention from the teacher. Teachers also lack training on how to effectively detect the socio-economic factors shaping students' learning processes, and to develop more appropriate pedagogical strategies to address their needs, including through the provision of psychosocial support or didactic materials (*ibid*). In addition, school leaders must be supported, as they play an important role in providing pedagogical support to teachers, building connections between schools and families, managing resources and finances, and detecting students at risk of repeating grades or dropping out (*ibid*). Challenges for students with disabilities in particular include stigma and discrimination which lead to them being excluded from schools, inaccessible infrastructure of school buildings, and the limited number of trained teachers, including in sign language or the use of Braille (Noboa, 2015). Discriminatory attitudes of teachers and other education personnel also lead to the exclusion of students of Haitian descent (Bartlett et al., 2011; Bartlett, 2012; Jayaram, 2013; D'Angelo, 2021), and dark-skinned boys experience verbal or physical abuse (Bartlett, 2012), and at times are denied access to school altogether (Giliberti, 2013a,b,c,d). Indeed, recent media articles point to racist practices, whereby Afro-Dominican girls or boys have been denied access to school for wearing their hair naturally in an afro-style (Vargas, 2015; Hoy, 2019). Yet there is a laguna of recent evidence in relation to teachers' perceptions and classroom practices in relation to student diversity.

4 Research approach

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted in two public schools on the north coast of the Dominican Republic. It focuses specifically on fifth and sixth grade teachers' perceptions in relation to inclusion and student diversity, how these perceptions shape their classroom practices, and the factors in their surrounding environment which either enable or inhibit their ability to provide quality teaching for all students, with a particular focus on those children who are identified as having a disability or being overage (*sobreedad*).

4.1 School setting and participants

The two schools, which we refer to as Taino and Larimar Schools were selected through a purposive sampling strategy: both had been identified as "good" schools by community members including parents, families, teachers and other educational practitioners of local non-governmental organizations. Approximately 20 individuals from each of the surrounding communities were approached to understand their views on "good" schools in the vicinity. These people often described "good" schools in relation to student behavior or classroom environments. While many of these individuals also initially identified private schools or religiously backed institutes as "good," consensus was built to identify a public, government-funded school that would help provide insights for a larger sample of schools, and ultimately generate evidence to inform public policy. A decision to focus on "good schools" was important given that we wanted to select information-rich cases. Rather than reproducing a deficit-driven discourse in understanding teachers and teaching practices (Cooper and McIntyre, 1996) in the Dominican Republic, we also wanted to identify strengths in the system and build on these.

Both schools are located on the north coast in what is considered "urban tourist" zones with a two-hour drive separating them. The schools included students from preschool to eighth grade. According to data from the administration offices, Taíno School had 484 students and Larimar School had 755 students, both the largest in their districts.

The first author contacted the school leaders to discuss the focus of research and seek permission. Once this had been granted, the school leaders recommended two teachers, one from each of the fifth and sixth grade levels, who they believed modelled effective pedagogical practices. Grades 5 and 6 were chosen because they constitute the last two grades of primary school, with significant dropout rates during this transition to secondary school (MINERD, 2016). Permission was sought from each teacher to ensure that they were willing to participate. The four teacher participants who were selected varied significantly in age and teaching experience, as indicated in Table 2.

Given the focus of the research was on teaching and learning practices, all students in grades 5 and 6 of the participating teachers were also included in various activities. Consent from both students and their parents were obtained. A total of 170 students (87 girls, 83 boys) participated in the formal research. Students were between the ages of 9 and 15 years; the most common age and the average age were both approximately 11 years. The initial two weeks of fieldwork were purely devoted to "hanging around" in the school (Delamont, 2016), to develop rapport with the teacher and student participants.

4.2 Methods

As an ethnographic study, this research draws on diverse methods, including prolonged participant observation, formal classroom

TABLE 2 Description of four teacher participants.

School	Taíno School		Larimar School	
Teacher pseudonym	Samuel	Miguel	Gloria	Fernanda
Gender	M	M	F	F
Age	28	27	37	43
Teaching experience	4	6	12	21

Teachers' teaching experience is calculated based on when the research was conducted (2018–2019), i.e., Taíno School teachers in their fourth year of teaching experience had just begun their fourth year, as fieldwork occurred at the beginning of the academic school year (September–November). Fieldwork in Larimar School was conducted from January–April. All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of participants.

observations, interviews and focus groups with teachers, students, and other education personnel, field notes, as well as visual data, including photographs of textbooks and the school and classroom environment (Delamont, 2016). Data collection took place over three months consecutively in each school, where the first author spent time actively participating in activities of the fifth and sixth grade classrooms. She also attended staff meetings, spent time with students during recess and lunch, and lived within walking distance from each of the schools. Observations and reflections were noted in a research journal, pictures of the school and other artefacts were also gathered for analysis.

More systematic data was gathered using weekly classroom observations and follow-up semi-structured interviews with teachers. Teacher interviews used "stimulated recall" to access teachers' sense-making processes (Calderhead, 1981). This implied the use of open-ended questions, such as "why" to probe teacher reflection and garner an understanding of how teachers made on-the-spot decisions during any given lesson. Ten formal interviews were conducted with each of the participating teachers, eight of which were stimulated recall interviews that followed classroom observations. An initial and final interview with teachers was also conducted to discuss more of teachers' general experiences and reflections based on their pre-service training, years of classroom experience, or to gather feedback on the research design. As data from these interviews reveal, the regular pattern of multiple classroom observations and post-observation interviews became important opportunities for teacher reflection, and in some cases catalysts for change. With student participants, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and arts-based and participatory research methods were used to gather data on their experiences at school and at home or in the wider community. Ethics approval for all data collection was granted by the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education, in alignment with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Given the focus of this paper, we centre teachers' voices and practices in the findings, and indicate the chronological trajectory of teachers' perceptions by indicating the interview (#1–10) from which the data emerged.

4.3 Data analysis

Data was analysed in an ongoing, collaborative, and iterative process. All interviews were transcribed and analysed in Spanish. A constant comparative approach was used to ensure data saturation was achieved both across teacher participants within the same school and across the two schools (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 2008, cited in Postholm, 2019). A final list of seven inductive and deductive codes were used (each with between three and four subcodes) to illustrate teachers' beliefs or perceptions of: (1) themself; (2) their students, (3) the curriculum and curricular subjects; (4) teaching and learning; (5) classroom management; (6) classroom-and school-level factors shaping teaching and learning; and (7) factors external to school shaping teaching and learning. The findings below emerge from the cross-cutting themes in the teacher data.

5 Findings

The first two subsections below explore teachers' perceptions of overaged (*sobreedad*) students, and their role in supporting these students. The next two subsections explore teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities and their roles in supporting these students. Differences and similarities between teacher participants and across schools are also highlighted throughout.

5.1 Teachers' perceptions of overaged students

Teachers commonly described *overaged* students in relation to their behavior in the classroom or their disposition towards learning. They often described *sobreedad* students' unwillingness to pay attention, their disinterest in class, or their lack of work ethic. As Samuel from Taíno School said:

> 'They [overage students] have repeated fourth grade and they are not at the same level [as their peers] because they already have other interests. Most students are younger, and [overage students] are older and a lot of the time they are not interested in the lesson because it's outside their normality.' (#1)

In seven of his ten interviews, Samuel mentioned how overage students did not have an "attitude" that was conducive of learning – or that they lacked "interest" in school.

Similarly, Fernanda, in Larimar School, noted the challenge of "working with a lot of kids with different ages," since "age differences make them have different interests, so they focus on different things" (#1). She described two of her overage students in relation to their lack of "responsibility" (#3), and later noted that "sometimes the oldest are the most problematic" (#8). These two teachers seem to associate *sobreedad* students with a behavior that disrupted learning, suggesting that their inability to learn or transition successfully throughout school is rooted in their disengagement or inadequate effort in the classroom.

In one interview, Fernanda elaborates upon this and makes specific connections to the overage student's homelife: "A student who is 17 years old and still in the sixth grade must have had a lot of setbacks, and sure something is going on at home as well" (#1). In this instance, Fernanda draws connections between the observed behavior of overaged students and the potential causes of those actions.

Gloria did this even more frequently. She described one of her overage students, Fredderick, a 13-year-old in her fifth-grade class, as "almost always distracted." But she also turned to his homelife and his personal experiences to understand what could be causing his actions. With Fredderick, for example, she discerned that his father was abusing illegal substances and being physically abusive to Fredderick at home – and that this had contributed to Fredderick's disengagement or low learning levels.

Miguel in Taíno School spoke of several of his overage students in a similar way. In the context of Marcel, an overage student in the sixth grade, he stated: "Marcel is an overage student who comes from a home where he hears bad words all the time. He knows his dad only by video calls, he's never met him in person. So that hurts him inside" (#2). Miguel associated *sobreedad* with bad behavior, and in this instant – like Fernanda – perceived the bad behavior to be a product of adversity at the household or family level. In these moments, these teachers cultivated empathy towards their overage children and tried to look towards the root causes of their behavior.

Samuel, however, only came to this realization eight weeks into the study. When asked to comment on a student, he rarely referred to their home life, family, or experiences outside of the classroom. However, in his final interview, Samuel was asked to comment on the research process and the three months of reflective discussions. In response, he said, "I see myself as more tolerant" (#10). When probed to explain, he told the story of a 12-year-old overage student in the fifth grade, whose father had recently passed away, and who had been separated from his siblings. Upon learning this of his student, and the "certain difficulties" that the child had experienced, Samuel explained that he could now "cope" better with the behavioral challenges the student presented in the classroom. By learning about the lived experiences and realities that children endured at home, Samuel also became more compassionate about the indiscipline observed in the classroom, rather than blaming the students' learning difficulties on "disinterest." Importantly, in his final interview, Samuel also described the importance of the weekly conversations, the opportunities to discuss with someone who had observed his classroom, and the fact that he often continued reflecting on what we discussed beyond our time together.

5.2 Teachers' perceptions of their roles in relation to overaged students

Teachers had distinct perceptions of their roles in relation to overaged students. On the one hand, Samuel described his role in relation to Taíno School's "Support Spaces" (*Espacios de Apoyo*). In Taíno School, Support Spaces were provided for students in the first and second cycles of primary (Grades 1–3 and Grades 4–6, respectively). This meant that fifth and sixth graders who were identified as having diverse learning needs were pulled out of the mainstream classroom at least once a week to work with a support teacher either one-on-one or in small group settings. This allowed for more individualised attention tailored to the cognitive and behavioral needs of these students. Samuel often described his role in relation to the Support Spaces: "There's also a *sobreedad* program which works to level out a student to his age group. Here in school a woman works to help them acquire the competencies that should be developed at their grade level." (#7).

He described these support spaces as "fruitful." Despite the Support Spaces teacher not having qualifications in special education or remedial learning, this learning environment had many advantages. Students were provided individualised attention or small group instruction. They were also provided opportunities to use didactic materials that were not available in the mainstream classrooms. In these settings, students who were normally observed distracted or unengaged during a lesson in the mainstream classroom were seen working actively and collaboratively with their peers and support teacher. They had access to a variety of books, magnet letters, or recycled bottle caps with syllables written in permanent markers.

But the availability of these segregated support spaces seemed to absolve Samuel of responsibility for these students, shifting it to the support teacher. When asked how he could support overage students in the classroom, Samuel said it would be "impossible" to differentiate instruction and provide them an activity that was at the adequate learning level for them (#10). In three of the eight classroom interviews, he described his teaching style as "democratic" because he taught all his students equally – rarely making modifications or providing individual support. Instead, Samuel's role in the classroom was one of a disciplinary nature: "Being more careful with them in everything is the first thing [I do]. Being more attentive to make sure they work, to make sure they do not leave the classroom, and all that" (#1).

Fernanda from Larimar School spoke of her overage students similarly. When speaking of Kurry, a *sobreedad* student three years older than most of his peers in the sixth grade, she described him as "distracted" and referred to the need "to be on top of him, almost always controlling him" (#3). A similar situation occurred with Goku. Goku was a 15-year-old in the sixth grade who often had to skip school to sell street food to support his family. Fernanda spoke to his aunt and insisted she allow him to attend school and finish. However, in school, Goku was often found wandering the halls, or in the classroom disengaged or even sleeping at his desk.

Fernanda and Samuel explain their roles in supporting overage students in relation to classroom management. They describe the need to keep overage students inside the classroom or "control" their behavior, but rarely described how to adapt their teaching strategies to support their learning.

These perceptions contrast significantly with those of Miguel and Gloria, who both describe their roles as teachers, parents, and even psychologists. During a classroom observation, Gloria was seen visiting students at their desks during a writing assignment. When asked to explain this in the follow-up interview, she noted how it was important to scaffold student thinking so that they could "*arrancar*" (get started) on their assignment. Gloria also described how she used positive reinforcement with her overage students to motivate them and integrate them into the lesson: "A high five for them is motivating. "Oh, they praised me for something. I did something right." It makes them feel happy" (#3). Miguel spoke similarly of how he changed his ways with his *sobreedad* student, Marcel:

> 'In the lesson plans there is a part that says, "Attention to Diversity." That's where I include Marcel because Marcel is a *sobreedad* student… I [also] work as if I were a psychologist… what I do with Marcel is joke around with him and I treat him at the same time as if I were his dad. So, when I tell Marcel, "Hey friend, you are my brother, pound it, high five. Hey everyone, give Marcel a round of applause," he feels like he has all of the attention, and that generates happiness and that makes him want to participate.'

Both Miguel and Gloria looked for ways to motivate their *sobreedad* students – not just to control them and avoid negative behavior, but to integrate them into the classroom in a positive or constructive manner. Miguel and Gloria were also observed using various pedagogical strategies to scaffold student learning, such as repeating questions, using multimodal explanations (e.g., with images and drawings) or providing additional time to complete an exercise. Gloria also accessed books from the Larimar School library to provide struggling readers with texts appropriate for their skill level. She was observed providing one-on-one support to students during lunch or recess, and often paired overage students with their younger but more advanced peers who could support them without making fun of them. These teachers had a repertoire of strategies to adapt their teaching and integrate overage students into the learning process.

Samuel, on the other hand, described the concept of "Attention to Diversity" in relation to his different classrooms rather than individual students. He explained that he adapted his teaching in a "group way," so he altered how he taught his lesson in class 5A and class 5B, rather than for any individual student (#7). He also explained how he tailored plans for subsequent classes based on how the day's lesson went. For example, when he saw a "weakness" in the group's understanding of adverbs, he planned to create a conceptual map to guide them in the next lesson (#2). While important to inclusion, these actions portray a collective notion of inclusion rather than one that respects and upholds the diverse learning needs of all individual students. Importantly, Samuel also explicitly acknowledged that he had challenges with classroom management, and felt his pre-service training did not prepare him to effectively respond to student misbehavior (#1). However, these perceptions – in the initial stages of data collection – differ significantly from his perceptions in the final interview, in which he clearly articulated his more "tolerant" approach (#10).

5.3 Teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities

Both Taíno and Larimar School completed an administrative data form from the Ministry of Education, listing certain demographic statistics, including the number of classrooms, staff, students in general, foreigners, and students with disabilities. In both schools, each section of the form was complete except for the number of students with disabilities, which was left empty. This lack of recognition of disabilities was evident throughout the data collection process, from teachers not using the word *disability*, to their accepted inability to identify or engage with children with disabilities who might be attending their classes. Gloria touched on this in an interview, describing the absence of identification and referral processes at Larimar School:

> 'I have not been given any diagnosis. For me to say there are any [students with disabilities], I would have to have, in my hand, a diagnostic of some kind… But I have yet to receive anything about any of these children.' (#7)

She went on to explain that only one parent had informed her of her child, Amelia's needs, but even this had not been with the support of an expert or specialist.

Similarly, Samuel from Taíno School noted the absence of information on students with learning disabilities: "There are some [students] that do not develop the required skills or knowledge and sometimes many of us [teachers] do not understand why. But it's because we do not know if they have dyslexia, we do not know if they have dyscalculia" (#5). For students who potentially have significant behavioral challenges, Samuel later made a similar comment: "You cannot tell if a student really has a discipline issue or if they have special needs. It's important that you know how to identify them with the help of counsellors, psychologists, and all that" (#9). With a lack of information, teachers were left on their own to identify students with disabilities and try to discern their learning needs.

When teachers perceived their students to have disabilities, they tended to refer to them as "special" students. In Taíno School, Miguel described Cristal, a girl perceived to have intellectual disabilities as a "special girl" with a "special" case. In Larimar School, Gloria spoke similarly of Ángel and Jesús, two students she suspected to have psychosocial disabilities: "Ángel and Jesús are two very special cases, even though I do not have a document that tells me that they are seeing a psychologist, or some sort of help [or] therapy, so that they can learn better" (#2). In the case of Jesús, she suspected a prognosis: "I've also seen that psychologically he has some small developmental delays in terms of knowing what is write and what is wrong" (#2). In the case of Ángel, she described how he lived with his mother, who was suspected of participating in illicit activities, including drug consumption and sex tourism in the local community: "He sees that unbalanced life that his mom has, and these are all factors that make Ángel develop differently than other children. Since the life he is living is different" (#5). In the context of these two students with unknown developmental disabilities, Gloria associated potentially adverse childhood experiences that may have influenced their circumstances and ultimately their behavior.

Teachers associated students with disabilities with "special needs" and/or the need for "specialized" help or "special" services, including through psychologists, therapist, or trained "special education" teachers. For example, Miguel and Gloria mentioned CONANI, the Dominican Republic Children and Adolescence National Council, a decentralised organisation dedicated to protecting the rights of young people. One teacher participant, Samuel, described how students with disabilities have certain limitations compared to their peers. He noted that only special education teachers can support these students in overcoming those limitations: "it's about the student's ability level. A student [with dyslexia or dyscalculia] cannot give any more than that because their cognitive capacity does not allow it" (#5).

5.4 Teachers' perceptions of their roles in relation to students with disabilities

Teachers' perceptions of their roles in supporting their students with disabilities were shaped by the policy and school environment, and their limited training in disability inclusive pedagogies. On the one hand, all teachers described challenges in relation to the lack of data on children's learning needs, and pressures to teach the curriculum in a timely manner to perform for district level *"tecnicos"* or supervisors who would observe their lessons. They described how their heterogeneous classes made it difficult to ensure all students developed the skills and knowledge the CBC required. Students lacked basic foundational skills in maths and literacy, thus making the "learning indicators" of the CBC unrealistic, "in the air," and not grounded in reality (Samuel). An interview with a government official also confirmed that the national curriculum and assessment system were not designed to accommodate students with disabilities or diverse learning needs.

At the school level, the availability of Support Spaces again played a role in shaping Taíno School teachers' perceptions. Miguel and Samuel both described how students with diverse learning needs were supposed to be pulled out of the classroom to receive support from the specialist teacher in a "special" environment. Samuel, for example, described how students with dyslexia and dyscalculia require trained specialists to support their learning needs.

> '[Dyslexia and dyscalculia] are learning difficulties that I as a teacher cannot help them with. Because these are disabilities that unfortunately there are few solutions for… because the people who tend to that part are specialists in that field of cognition.' (#5)

He went on to describe his role as a primary subject area teacher, without the "special education" qualifications or skills to support students with disabilities: "We are primary school teachers, or subject area teachers. That part [working with students with disabilities] is a different cognitive area; it's special education" (#5). Thus "special education" was regarded as something separate, and Samuel viewed himself as ill-equipped and/or unprepared to support students with disabilities. Instead, he absolved the responsibility to external "experts." Miguel similarly explained this in the case of Cristal, the same girl who was suspected to have a form of an intellectual disability:

> 'In Cristal's case, she's a special girl. Because her case is *special,* I do not often call attention to her. The only thing that I tell her is "sit up straight for me, pay attention to the class." But few times I do this, because well, they treat her. You have to treat her apart. That's why there is a teacher who sometimes takes her out of the class and treats her apart. Because she is a girl who, because she has special needs, one must treat her in a *special* way.' (#2)

In this interview, Miguel explicitly describes a disciplinary role – one strictly based on classroom management, to ensure Cristal is sitting up straight and paying attention, but with no reference to the types of pedagogical practices needed to support her learning. Rather, he explains that academic support should come from elsewhere, as Alicia must be treated "apart" from her peers.

Like Miguel, Fernanda in Larimar School, when asked to comment on a sixth-grade boy perceived as having intellectual disabilities, described her role as behavioral in nature. "Sometimes when I see he's a little quite or distracted, I ask him a question to see how he's doing" (#3). But Fernanda also went one step further. In a subsequent interview, she described how she tried to support this student's literacy skills by engaging other stakeholders, including his family and a classroom volunteer:

> 'There are letters that he does not know. And I've spoken to his father, he says that he's following up on this at home, but I do not feel it… I also told a woman to help me. She would come last year with me, and she would take three students out into the hall and help me in that way. But it seems that she has another job this year and cannot come help me.' (#5)

In the absence of formal Support Spaces in Larimar School, Fernanda describes how she made her own spaces to support students with diverse learning needs. In doing so, like Samuel, she shifts the responsibility of inclusive education from herself to external support structures, including other (volunteer) teachers or the student's parents.

The perceptions of these three teacher participants contrast significantly with those of the fourth teacher, Gloria. When Gloria spoke of Ángel and Jesús, two students believed to have psychosocial disabilities, she noted the need for trained specialists, but she also held herself accountable for the students while in her classroom:

> 'I try to speak to them the most peacefully that I can. It's the only way that I have as a teacher because that part has to do with a psychologist. They must be treated apart by a psychologist, but I apply what I can. I do not know about psychology, but I try and read every now and then how certain behaviours are treated, how to manage them. Because we are in this. And we must get through it. With those kids you must find a way of helping them. We know that we have little support. But with the support that we have, we must help these kids.' (#2)

Despite the lack of support in her work environment, Gloria assumes responsibility and seeks out information that will better prepare her to tend to the diverse learning needs of her students, including those suspected to have disabilities. She was observed providing positive reinforcement and individual support to these students in the classroom, speaking to them calmly, teaching them breathing exercises, cultivating empathy and patience amongst their peers, and playing meditation videos for the whole class to practice developing social–emotional skills together.

6 Discussion

This ethnographic study has provided important insights to further our understanding of inclusive education in the Dominican Republic. Though not comparative by design, this research points to how the unique material, social, institutional, and political contexts of each school shape teachers' perceptions and practices (Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012), particularly in relation to overage students and students with disabilities. Though some school-level factors (e.g., the availability of Support Spaces) also shaped teachers' perceptions, teacher participants within schools had unique and influential attitudes, skills, and knowledge.

First, the findings of this study resonate with international literature that points to how teachers' perceptions shape their practice (De and Malik, 2021), and how these perceptions are often framed within a deficit lens (Valencia, 1997). Valencia (2010) describes deficit thinking as when teachers blame students' failure to learn on their own "internal deficits or deficiencies" which may be cognitive, behavioral or motivational (p. 6–7). Indeed, some teachers in this study described overage students in relation to their indiscipline or lack of interest in their studies. Samuel, for example, used the word "attitude" several times, to explain how overage students did not have a scholarly disposition, and Fernanda described them as having other "interests", which were not seen as conducive to school learning. Furthermore, research focusing on children with disabilities in other parts of the global South also highlights similar trends wherein teachers tend to frame children with disabilities in highly deficit terms, sometimes even questioning whether learning was the main purpose of their classroom participation (Singal, 2019; Taneja-Johansson et al., 2023). In our research, not only did teachers tend to describe students with disabilities in deficit terms, but they were also invisible in the classroom. Without any information on their functional or health needs, and how to best support them, teachers perceived these students as "special" requiring "specialist support." When teachers believed students were unable to learn in the mainstream classroom, they resorted to relying solely on classroom management strategies or turning to external support for help. The significant lack of support available to these mainstream teachers was clearly evident.

However, as this study has also shown, teachers' perceptions are not rigid. Rather, when provided with more information about their students and opportunities for reflection on their practices, these perceptions undergo change (Fullan, 2006). As teachers learned about individual students' home lives, families, or community contexts, during the course of ongoing reflective interactions, they began to develop a more holistic understanding of children. For example, instead of teachers describing overage students' individual behavior or personality, they expressed an understanding of how external factors, such as intrafamilial relationships, experiences with adverse childhood experiences, poverty, substance abuse, violence, and other related issues, influence the child's ability to engage in teaching and learning activities and/or develop important skills. What became evident during the research process was that as teachers became more sensitive to the personal biographies of the children, their perceptions and practices began to show a shift as they made more efforts to tend to individual needs. This is perhaps best evidenced by the story of Samuel, who described himself as more "tolerant" in the final (10th) week of classroom observations and interviews. Teachers who began to reflect on the important impact of a student's home life and family made intentional efforts to engage family members and strengthen home-school relationships to support student learning. For example, Gloria in particular took extra time to provide individualized support to students, differentiating instruction by using books or literacy materials that were more aligned with their reading level, pairing them with more advanced peers, or providing positive reinforcement in the classroom to encourage their learning.

Over two decades of research on culturally relevant teaching suggests effective teachers try to know students beyond the confines of classrooms (Gay, 2010). Whether a health assessment for students with disabilities or an understanding of the adverse childhood experiences faced by overage students, as teachers develop a deeper understanding of the root causes of student disengagement, they seem to become more willing or motivated to adapt their practice and tend to students' diverse learning needs. Inclusive teachers thus believe in the educability of their students and are motivated to learn more about their students' cultures, home and community environments, and how these factors shape the very nature of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Inclusive schools encourage information sharing around children. They foster an understanding of the whole child, the myriad factors shaping learning, and the psychological, behavioral, and cognitive effects of poverty and adverse childhood experiences (Blodgett and Lanigan, 2018).

Thus, school and community partnerships are critical to inclusion. In the context of the DR this means meaningfully engaging parents and families, as well as other important actors within a child's support network, such as CONANI and the MINERD's Resource Centres for Attention to Diversity (CAD). Indeed, this study has shown that for inclusive education to become a reality, teachers need to be supported. Firstly, teachers need to understand and have support in assessing the individual needs of students in their classroom. This could range from a simple understanding and appreciation of differences in student learning styles, to a more rigorous approach to the identification of needs for students with more profound disabilities. This information needs to extend beyond simple diagnostic labels to an understanding on how to shape effective teaching and learning interactions in the classroom.

Teacher training that equips teachers with practical and a wide range of pedagogical strategies, the provision of accessible and adapted resources for students with different abilities, and a conducive school environment, are among the factors that shape effective student participation in the classroom (Noboa, 2015; Velásquez, 2020). At the school level, this study has shown that where Support Spaces do exist, where teachers have access to classroom assistants or remedial support teachers, there is a need to clearly identify each actor's roles and responsibilities and strengthen coordination and accountability mechanisms to ensure all students receive adequate support. At the policy level, this study also revealed several challenges, including the limited space or opportunity for teachers to adapt curriculum and assessment strategies for students with diverse learning needs.

7 Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into how teachers perceive and attend to students with diverse learning needs in the Dominican Republic, thus contributing to our understanding of inclusive education. Nevertheless, as an exploration of four Dominican teachers' perceptions and practices within the context of two primary schools, one limitation of this study is the small sample size. A larger sample could add breadth to the knowledge constructed surrounding Dominican teachers' perceptions of inclusion, and how they support students with disabilities, special education needs, or those who are overaged. As evident in the findings, differences exist across schools, so amplifying the sample could also strengthen the claims made herein.

Still, our findings echo prior research in the DR, which indicates a need for inclusive teacher education and training and more teacher research to better understand the country's progress toward SDG4 (Jovine, 2017). While the Dominican government has demonstrated a commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning processes and fostering safe and inclusive schools, especially for the most vulnerable students, efforts have been highly centralized and resources have not been distributed equitably across socio-economic levels, geographies, or ethnic-racial divides (Hamm-Rodríguez and Veras Diaz, 2021). In our study, even the two participating schools – a two-hour car ride apart – had unequal access to resources, such as equipped libraries or Support Spaces to provide remedial support to primary-age students. More research is needed to understand how teachers in Dominican public schools can be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to adequately address learning diversity in the classroom, and to support the particular cognitive and psychosocial needs of overage students and students with disabilities.

Further, this study demonstrates the importance of providing structured spaces for teacher reflection. As teachers analyze their practice, they learn how to construct new understandings and question entrenched beliefs or attitudes towards their pedagogy or student learning (Schön, 1983; Annig, 1988). This was especially evident through the experience of Samuel, whose perceptions of overaged students changed over the course of the three months that he participated in this study. Therefore, this study has shown that research on teachers' perceptions and practices can reveal important insights to inform future scholarship and policymaking, ultimately to ensure all young people in the Dominican Republic have access to an inclusive, equitable, and quality education.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation, until December 31, 2024. After this, in line with the ethics approval, all raw data will be destroyed.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Ethics Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SD'A: Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Formal analysis. NS: Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Supervision.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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