



# “Everyone goes their own way”: perceptions of students of special education centers about interpersonal relationships with their peers

*“Cada uno sigue su camino”: percepción del alumnado de centros de educación especial sobre las relaciones interpersonales con sus iguales*

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## Abstract

Ensuring inclusive, quality education poses a challenge for the education system. In recent years, educational progress has been made to ensure that the right to education of certain groups, such as students with special educational needs, is not violated. However, schooling models that segregate on the basis of abilities persist. To understand this reality, it is essential to listen to the voices of the true protagonists. The objective of this study was to analyze the perceptions of students in special education centers in the Region of Murcia (Spain) regarding the quality of their interpersonal relationships with their peers, both in special education centers and in mainstream schools. To this end, a qualitative phenomenological design was used through semi-structured interviews with 36 students enrolled in special education centers. The results revealed different perceptions, demonstrating the impact of the quality of the relationships they establish on their sense of belonging to the group. Based on the findings of this study, it has been possible to identify some of the aspects that hinder the creation of strong interpersonal bonds and reflect on the socio-educational implications necessary to foster quality relationships and, consequently, improve the educational and social inclusion of all students.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, special education, persons with disabilities, interpersonal relations, students.

## Resumen

Garantizar una educación inclusiva y de calidad supone un reto para el sistema educativo. En los últimos años, se han realizado progresos educativos para no vulnerar el derecho a la educación de determinados colectivos, como es el alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales. Sin embargo, persisten modelos de escolarización que segregan por motivos de capacidad. Para poder conocer esta realidad es fundamental escuchar la voz de los verdaderos protagonistas. El objetivo de este estudio ha sido analizar la percepción del alumnado de los centros de educación especial de la Región de Murcia (España) sobre la calidad de sus relaciones interpersonales con sus iguales, tanto de centros de educación especial como de centros ordinarios. Para ello, se empleó un diseño cualitativo de tipo fenomenológico a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas a 36 alumnos escolarizados en centros de educación especial. Los resultados han mostrado diferentes percepciones, pudiéndose comprobar la repercusión que tiene la calidad de las relaciones que establecen respecto a su sentimiento de pertenencia al grupo. A partir de los hallazgos de este estudio, se han podido señalar algunos de los aspectos que dificultan la creación de vínculos interpersonales sólidos y reflexionar sobre las implicaciones socioeducativas necesarias para favorecer relaciones de calidad y, en consecuencia, mejorar la inclusión educativa y social de todo el alumnado.

**Palabras clave:** educación inclusiva, educación especial, persona con discapacidad, relaciones interpersonales, estudiantes.

## 1. Introduction

Although inclusive education is the subject of international debate regarding its meaning, due to the different interpretations attributed to it (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2024), the specialized literature defines it as a process that seeks to ensure that students of all ages are provided with meaningful, quality educational opportunities in their local community, together with their friends and peers (Todorova and Bilgeri, 2025).

Achieving inclusive education is currently a challenge, becoming one of the major sustainable development goals for transforming 21st-century society. Progress in inclusive education has been recognized at the international level (UNESCO, 2020) and in Spain (Echeita, 2022), but certain practices that hinder its achievement continue to be observed (Graham, 2024). One of these barriers is the existence of different schooling environments for certain students in the education system, such as special education centers, which are attended by those with significant disabilities (Ainscow, 2024).

This situation is identical in various countries around the world (Echeita and Simón, 2020). In the case of Spain, despite the fact that the education law recognizes the right to inclusive education and stipulates that all students must be educated in regular schools, there are 484 special education centers (Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes, 2025). This fact has been denounced by the Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities [CRPD] (2024), as the Spanish education system repeatedly violates the right to inclusive and quality education by excluding people with disabilities from general education. According to Göransson et al. (2020), the coexistence of different types of schooling is a form of exclusion, segregation, isolation, classification, differentiation, and discrimination in the classroom, which can compromise social interactions and relationships among peers (Pirker et al., 2025).

The social relationships that students establish in learning environments are fundamental both for their development and for the construction of inclusive environments (Hartmann et al., 2024), as the key role played by peers as agents of inclusion has been highlighted (Montanero et al., 2024). To this end, the classroom must become an environment that pro-

motes friendship, and the welcoming and acceptance of differences (Lin et al., 2025). Although children with disabilities often face difficulties in being socially accepted, which complicates their interpersonal relationships (Biswal and Mishra, 2025), they show a preference for forming friendships with people without disabilities (Hoffman et al., 2021).

Research has pointed to the benefits of peer learning in ordinary contexts. Thus, greater effectiveness of teaching-learning processes has been proven (Koegel et al., 2012); greater recognition and appreciation of differences, which leads to greater motivation to learn (Nieto and Moriña, 2021); as well as an increase in opportunities to promote socio-affective development (Pinto et al., 2019). However, students enrolled in special education centers have fewer opportunities, which can make them invisible to others, both inside and outside of school (Vila-Merino et al., 2024).

Douma et al. (2024) highlight that reducing the presence and participation of students enrolled in separate schooling modalities in activities with their peers in ordinary modalities can negatively affect their interpersonal relationships, generating a lower preference for them. According to Goodall and MacKenzie (2018), this lack of close friendships contributes to feelings of exclusion. In order to understand these realities, it is essential to consider and listen to the opinions of the protagonists through a process of listening to their voices (Fielding, 2011).

The student voice movement encompasses all initiatives that promote student participation, consultation, opinion, and leadership in educational institutions. In the field of educational research, this process and strategy allow researchers to get closer to students' perceived and lived reality (Proffitt et al., 2025). Listening to this voice is essential for gathering their perceptions of educational reality, which allows for more complex and diverse views on educational phenomena (Vinatea-Elorrieta et al., 2025). Furthermore, as Fielding (2011) proposes, this movement offers a valuable opportunity for schoolchildren with SEN who require highly specialized care to express themselves and make their opinions on education visible.

Listening to their voices is not a choice, since, as stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ONU, 1989), children also have the right to participate, express their opinions, and

be heard. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (ONU, 2006) also defends the right of children with disabilities to freely express their opinions on matters that affect them. However, despite these legal guarantees, Messiou (2019) points out that the voices of students remain surprisingly absent from important debates, especially those who are excluded within these groups, such as students with disabilities (Byrne and Lundy, 2020).

According to Messiou et al. (2025), the voice of students can reveal inequalities or injustices that affect marginalized groups, both socially and institutionally, and can serve to denounce an education system that sometimes neglects and renders certain groups invisible. Vlachou et al. (2024) argue that in order to achieve truly inclusive systems, it is necessary to recognize students with disabilities as an essential source of information, since they are experts in their own experiences. In this context, this process is presented as a key tool for improving educational practices and reforming the education system (Mayes, 2020).

Because of the latter, there is a need to know whether students enrolled in special education centers feel accepted. To this end, this study focuses on these students' perceptions of their interpersonal relationships with their peers, both in special education centers and in regular schools.

Therefore, the general objective of this research is to analyze the perception of students in special education centers in the Region of Murcia regarding the interpersonal relationships they establish with their peers. In order to achieve this, the following specific objectives are proposed:

1. To understand the quality of the relationships established between students in special education centers from the students' own perspective.
2. To identify the perception of students in special education centers regarding the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers in mainstream schools.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

This research falls within the interpretive paradigm and follows a phenomenological qualitative method. This design allows the object of study to be analyzed from the participants' perspective, which is the most suitable for understanding and describing their experiences. It also allows us to capture the essence of the phenomenon studied by eliminating pre-established theories or ideas (Vagle, 2025).

### 2.2 Context and participants

This study was conducted in the Region of Murcia (Spain), where there are a total of 13 special education centers, eight of which are public and five are private-subsidized. These centers are established as resource centers, distributed by geographical areas of operation, and serve a population of 963 students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). All of them have a diagnosis of intellectual disability, usually associated with other clinical conditions: sensory disability, autism spectrum disorder, mental health conditions, and/or cerebral palsy or damage.

All special education centers and a total of 36 students participated in this study, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Study participants*

Center of special need	Age	Gender	Educational Stage	Experience in other schooling modalities	Identifier
Center 1	21	Male	PVI		Student 1
	15	Male	Secondary	Combined	Student 2
	19	Male	PVI		Student 3
Center 2	14	Female	6th grade	Regular Classroom	Student 4
	19	Male	PVI	Open Classroom	Student 5

Center of special need	Age	Gender	Educational Stage	Experience in other schooling modalities	Identifier
Center 3	19	Female	PVI		Student 6
	19	Female	PVI		Student 7
Center 4	20	Male	PVI	Open Classroom	Student 8
	11	Female	5th grade	Open Classroom	Student 9
	16	Male	Secondary	Regular Classroom	Student 10
School 5	20	Male	PVI		Student 11
	20	Male	PVI		Student 12
	19	Male	PVI		Student 13
	16	Male	Secondary education		Student 14
School 6	6	Female	1st grade		Student 15
	12	Female	6th grade		Student 16
	16	Male	Secondary		Student 17
	21	Male	PVI		Student 18
Center 7	20	Female	PVI		Student 19
	13	Male	6th grade		Student 20
School 8	13	Female	Elementary		Student 21
	15	Male	Secondary		Student 22
	16	Male	Secondary school		Student 23
	19	Male	PVI		Student 24
Center 9	17	Female	Secondary		Student 25
	19	Male	PVI		Student 26
	15	Male	Secondary education		Student 27
School 10	21	Male	PVI		Student 28
	16	Male	Secondary education		Student 29
School 11	19	Male	PVI	Open Classroom	Student 30
	18	Male	PVI	Regular Classroom	Student 31
Center 12	17	Male	PVI	Regular Classroom	Student 32
	17	Male	PVI	Regular Classroom	Student 33
	16	Female	Secondary Education	Combined	Student 34
School 13	21	Male	PVI		Student 35
	23	Male	PVI		Student 36

Their characteristics in terms of age, gender, educational stage, and experience in other types of schooling were heterogeneous.

The participants' ages ranged from 6 to 23 years ( $X = 17.17$ ;  $SD = 3.42$ ). Ten (27.78%) were female and 26 (72.22%) were male. Six students (16.67%) were in primary education, ten (27.78%) were in compulsory secondary education (ESO), and 20 (55.55%) were in inclusive life projects (PVI). In addition, of the total number of participants, 11

(30.56%) had previous experience in other types of schooling: regular classroom ( $N = 5$ ; 45.46%), open classroom ( $N = 4$ ; 36.36%), or combined schooling ( $N = 2$ ; 18.18%).

### 2.3 Information collection technique

The technique used to collect information was the semi-structured interview. Following Kvale (2011), this technique was used because it allowed us

to understand how students perceived, interpreted, and experienced interpersonal relationships in the school environment.

A script was developed that included nine questions organized into three dimensions:

- *Dimension 1. Relationship with classmates* (Do you get along with your classmates? Have you ever had problems with your classmates? Do you have friends here?).
- *Dimension 2. Relationship with classmates from regular schools* (Do you do activities with children from other schools? Do you like spending time with children from other schools? Do you enjoy these activities?).
- *Dimension 3. Relationship with friends* (Who is your best friend? Do they go to school with you? What do you most enjoy doing with your friends?).

The design of this question script was adjusted to the participants' level of communicative competence and intellectual functioning. To this end, simple affirmative sentences were used and, in some cases, professionals from the schools provided support during the process to facilitate communication and understanding of the questions.

To obtain quality evidence, the initial script was submitted for expert review, in which a total of eight people participated, six of whom were university professors who were experts in the subject area

and two of whom worked in educational centers with students with the same profile as the participants in this study.

In order to give the participating students, advance notice of the activity, both the teachers in charge and the students' families were informed well in advance. Likewise, to ensure compliance with ethical and confidentiality principles, as proposed by Pastor-Andrés et al. (2025), the assessment of a university ethics committee was requested, receiving its favorable report (report identification: 4312/2023), and information sheets, informed consent documents, and informed assent documents were prepared. The interviews were conducted individually and in person in designated areas within the educational centers, such as the library or the management team's offices, and lasted an average of approximately 30 minutes per session.

## 2.4 Information analysis plan

The data were processed according to the cyclical process of qualitative data analysis explained by Rodríguez et al. (1996). First, a verbatim transcription of the information collected was made. Second, the units of analysis were separated into thematic criteria associated with the objectives. Third, the units of analysis were identified and classified through an inductive coding process. One category, four codes, and 14 subcodes were identified, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Book of categories, codes, and subcodes used for the analysis of the information

Category 1. Interpersonal relationships between participating students and their peers	
Codes	Subcodes
	(Schedule_lecCE_goodfriendship) They have friendly and companionable relationships with the rest of the students.
(Schedule_lecCE) School hours with peers: interpersonal relationships between students at the special education center during school hours	(Horario_lecCE_acceptable_friendship) They have some friends and get along well with the rest of their classmates.
	(Schedule_lecCE_difficultyintherelationship) They have had or are having some problems with their classmates.
	(Schedule_lecCE_lackoffriendship) They do not have a good relationship with their classmates and have hardly had any friendships.

Category 1. Interpersonal relationships between participating students and their peers	
Codes	Subcodes
(Schedule_non-class_CE) Non-class time with peers: interpersonal relationships between students at the CEE during non-class time	(Schedule_non-school_regular_contact) They maintain close contact with their classmates and make plans to spend their free time together.
	(Schedule_non-school_time_sporadic_contact) They sometimes make plans with classmates outside of school.
	(Schedule_non-school_CEE_anecdotal_contact) They have little contact with classmates outside of school hours.
(Non-school_hours_CO) Non-school hours with peers: interpersonal relationships between CEE students and CO students outside school hours	(Schedule_non-school_CO_regular_contact) They maintain close contact with classmates and make plans for leisure activities in their free time.
	(Schedule_non-school_CO_sporadic_contact) They sometimes make plans with classmates outside of school.
	(Non-school_hoursCO_anecdotal_contact) They have little contact with classmates outside school hours.
(School_hours_CO) School hours with peers: interpersonal relationships between CEE students and CO students during school hours	(Schedule_schoolCO_goodfriendship) They have friendly and companionable relationships with the rest of the students.
	(School_schedule_CO_acceptable_friendship) They have some friends and get along well with the rest of their classmates.
	(School_schedule_relationship_difficulties) They have had or are having some problems with their classmates.
	(Schedule_lectCO_lackoffriendship) They do not have a good relationship with their classmates and have hardly had any friendships.

Fourth and finally, the data was arranged and transformed through the creation of semantic content networks. The software used for the processing and analysis of qualitative data was ATLAS.ti version 25 for Windows.

### 3. Results

The results are presented below, organized around the two specific objectives of this study.

#### 3.1 Results of the specific objective

*To understand the quality of the relationships established among students in special education centers from the students' own perspective*

In order to respond to this objective, the analysis was carried out by looking at relationships at two different times: during school hours and outside school hours, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Semantic network of the first specific objective

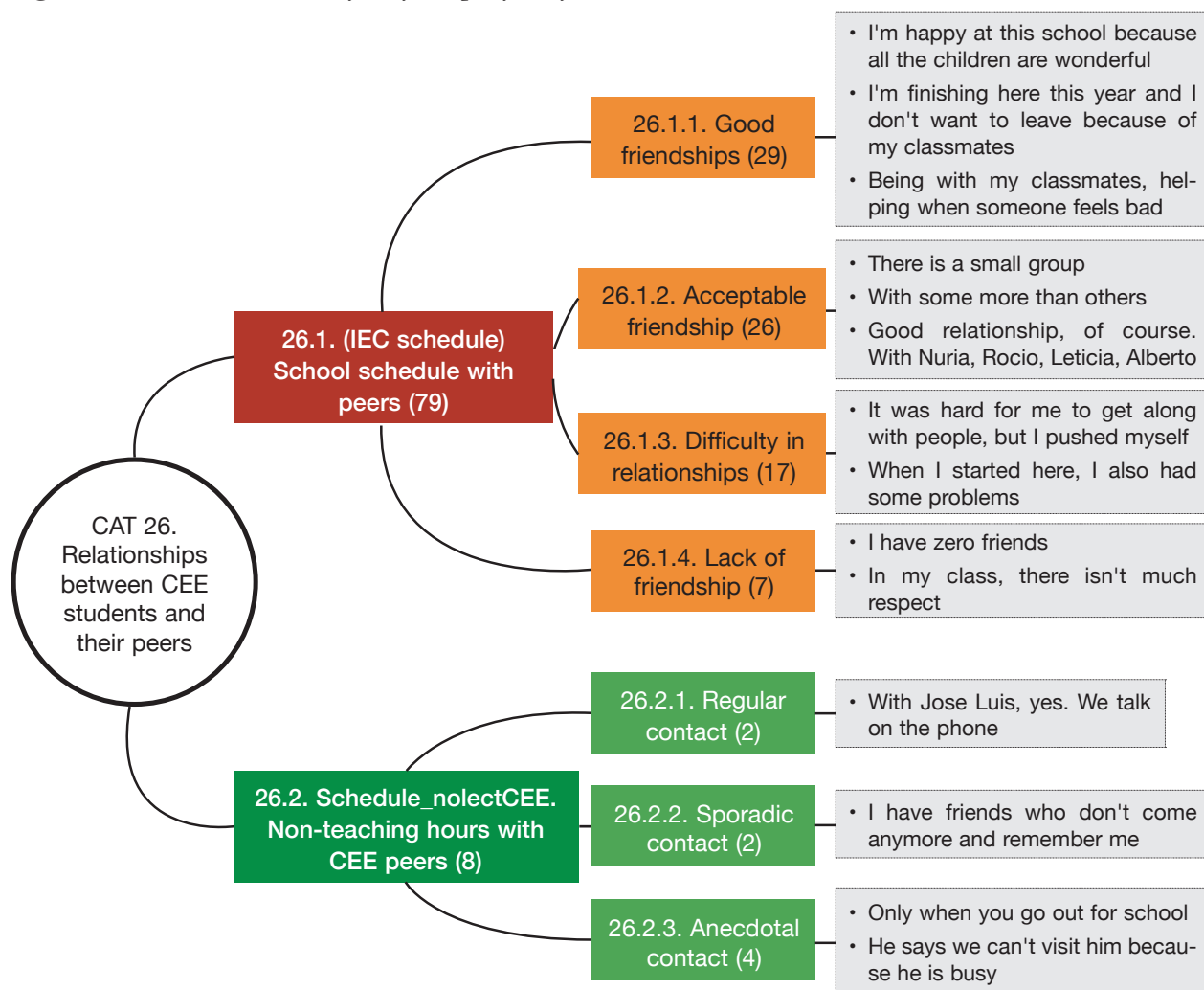


Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of the analysis subcodes associated with the code “school hours with the same CEE” and “school hours with the same CO,” allowing us to describe the perception of the quality of relationships during school

hours. This table distinguishes between different levels of social connection, from good friendship to lack of friendship, which facilitates a comparison between the relational patterns observed in the two sets of data analyzed.

**Table 3.** Frequency and percentage of analysis subcodes for the code School hours with the same CEE and School hours with the same CO

	SUBCODES Ncitas (%)				
	Good Friendship	Acceptable Friendship	Difficulty in Relationships	Lack of friendship	TOTAL
With peers with special educational needs	29 (36,71 %)	26 (32,91 %)	17 (21,52 %)	7 (8,86 %)	79 (100 %)
With equal CO	5 (21,74 %)	12 (52,17 %)	2 (8,70 %)	4 (17,39 %)	23 (100 %)

With regard to relationships during school hours, 79 textual citations were obtained, organized and classified into four subcodes based on the perceived level of quality in interpersonal relationships: good friendship, acceptable friendship, difficulty in relationships, and lack of friendship, as shown in Table 3.

The participants perceive that their relationship with their schoolmates is good, establishing bonds of friendship (Nquotes = 29) due to their high regard for their classmates and a feeling of well-being:

I am happy at this school because all the children at the school are wonderful. (student 25)

I'm finishing here this year and I don't want to leave because of my classmates. (student 18)

Other participants point out that, although they have a good relationship with all their classmates in general, they only form friendships with some of them (Ncitas = 26):

I get along with everyone, but with some more than others... with Noelia, Raquel, sometimes with Lucía, with Alejandro... (student 28)

However, there are quotes (Ncitas = 17) that indicate that some participants have experienced or

are experiencing difficulties in their relationships with their classmates, although these situations have sometimes been resolved:

I find it hard to get along with people. (student 32)

When I started here, as I wasn't at this school before, I had some problems. (student 36)

Finally, there are students who, less frequently (Ncitas = 7), indicate that they do not have a good relationship with their classmates and have not established friendships with them, as can be seen in the following quotes:

I have zero friends. (student 22)

I don't have any friends in my class; there isn't much respect. (student 29)

Regarding the relationships established outside of school hours with their classmates at the CEE, eight quotes were obtained and classified into three subcodes of analysis based on the frequency with which the relationship or contact is perceived (regular, sporadic, or anecdotal), as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of the subcodes associated with the code "non-school hours with CEE peers" and "school hours with CO peers," allowing us to describe the perception of the quality of relationships during non-school hours.

**Table 4.** Frequency and percentage of analysis subcodes for the Non-school hours code with the same CEE and Non-school hours with the same CO

	SUBCODES Ncitas (%)			
	Usual contact	Occasional sporadic	Anecdotal contact	TOTAL
With equal EC	2 (25 %)	2 (25 %)	4 (50 %)	8 (100 %)
With equal CO	15 (35,71 %)	24 (57,14 %)	3 (7,14 %)	42 (100 %)

Half of the quotes collected (Nquotes = 4) indicate that students at special education centers have little contact with their classmates outside of school hours, mentioning that they only interact with them on outings organized by the center or that they have few opportunities to interact with them outside of school hours, as can be seen in the following quotes:

Only when we go out with the school. (student 20)

I don't visit them outside of school... (student 17)

However, some participants point out that the contact they have with their classmates is sporadic (Ncitas = 2). Thus, they do not interact with them

on a regular basis, but there is occasional contact, as reflected in the following quote:

I have classmates I don't see much, but they remember me. (student 10)

In addition, some participants indicate that they maintain contact with their classmates outside of school hours, either by spending free time together or by keeping in touch with them through other means, as shown in the two quotes identified (Ncitas = 2):

With Juan, yes, we play together. (student 19)

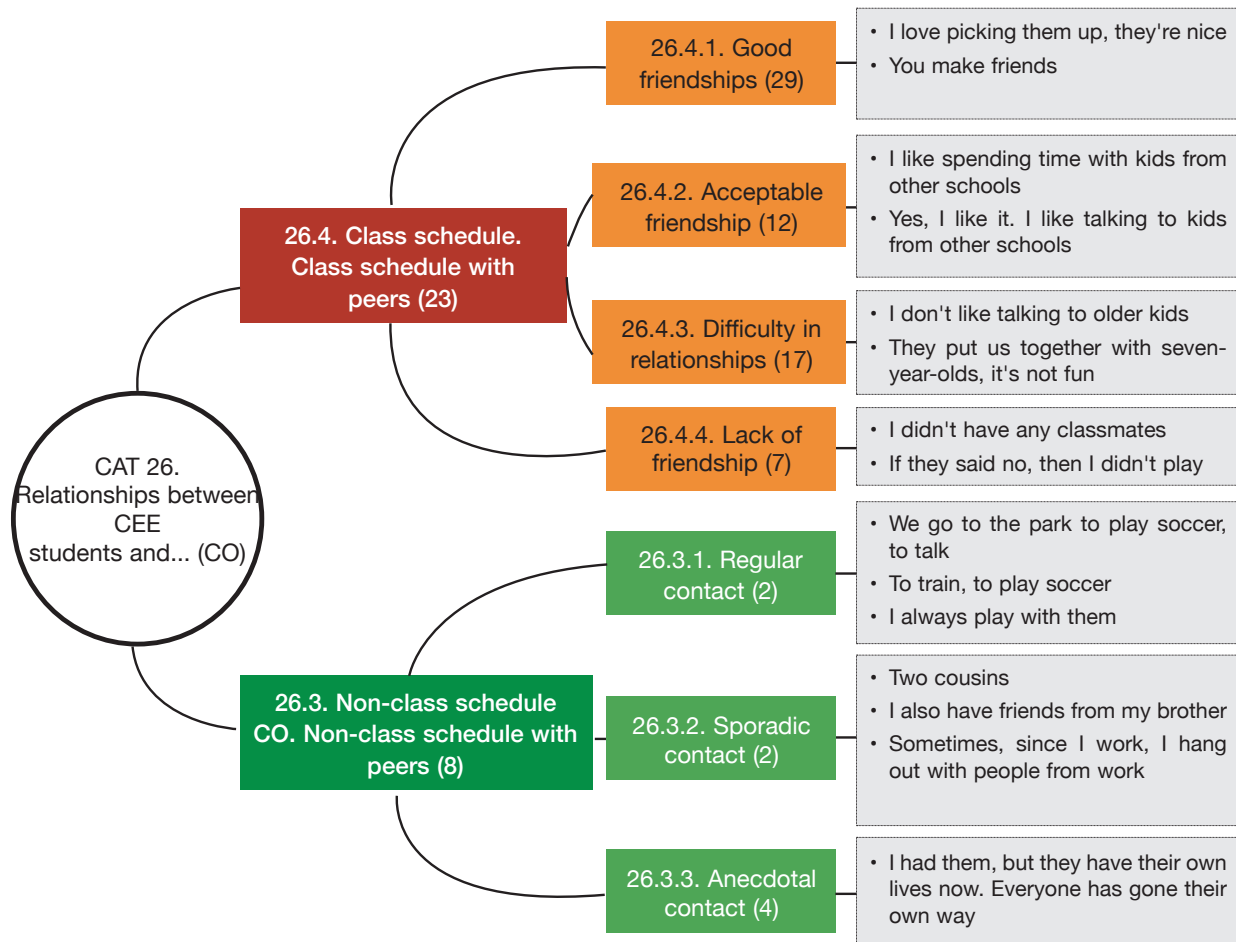
We talk on the phone. (student 35)

### 3.2 Results of the specific objective

*Identify the perception of students in special education centers regarding the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers in regular schools*

To address this objective, a distinction has been made between relationships with peers from regular schools during and outside school hours, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Semantic network of the second specific objective



Forty-two quotes were obtained referring to the relationship established outside school hours between students at special education centers and children enrolled in other schools. As shown in Table 4, these relationships were classified into three codes

based on the frequency of contact: regular, sporadic, or anecdotal.

Some of the participants highlight a regular relationship with children from other schools (Ncitas = 15), with whom they make plans for leisure or

extracurricular activities, as shown in the following quotations:

I always play with them. (student 31).

We go training. We play soccer. (student 30).

We go to the park to play soccer, to talk... When we're there, we also listen to music. (student 26).

However, most of the quotes (Ncitas = 24) indicate that the relationships that participants establish with children from other schools outside school hours are sporadic and tend to be limited to family relationships, acquaintances, or close neighbors, as reflected in the following quotes:

I only play with two cousins. (student 13)

I have friends too, I have my brother's friends and we mess around a bit. (student 29)

I play with friends from my building. (student 32)

Other quotes (Ncitas = 3) reveal a lack of interaction with other children in their free time, highlighting, in some cases, the loss of relationships with those who were previously their friends, as can be seen in the following quote:

I had them, but I don't know if I live right next door to them. But they have their own lives now. (student 28)

As for the relationships established during school hours with classmates from other schools, 23 quotes were obtained, which were classified into four codes according to the perceived level of quality in interpersonal relationships: good friendship, acceptable friendship, difficulty in relationships, and lack of friendship, as shown in Table 3.

Most of the quotes (Nquotes = 12) identify that CEE students perceive a satisfactory relationship with their CO peers during school hours, showing an interest in sharing activities and socializing, as reflected in the following quotes:

I like spending time with children from other schools (Student 1).

Yes, I do. I like talking to the schools (Student 10).

Other quotes collected (Ncitas = 5) reveal a positive relationship with classmates from other schools, whom they consider friends and who stand out for their friendly attitude, as shown in the following quotes:

I love meeting up with them, they're nice. (Student 19)

It's great. You make friends. (Student 4)

However, some comments from participants (Quotes = 4) reveal a lack of friendship ties and a feeling of distance from their peers in mainstream schools, as can be seen in the following quotes:

I don't have classmates or friends from other schools. Everyone goes their own way. (student 35)

They don't come to my classroom. (student 2)

Finally, some participants have pointed out difficulties in establishing friendships (Ncitas = 2), and consider that the age difference between those who come from regular schools and participate in activities alongside special education centers acts as an obstacle, as evidenced in the following quotes:

They put us together with seven-year-olds, six from school, and that's not fun. (student 32).

I don't like talking to the older kids. (student 10)

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

With regard to specific objective 1, to ascertain the quality of the relationships established between students in special education centers from their own perspective, the results indicate that the school context of special education centers constitutes a significant space for interpersonal relationships for students. In this study, we found that one of the great possibilities offered by schooling is the interactions and communication that are established between peers, as previously pointed out by Hartmann et al. (2024), Lin et al. (2025), and Montanero et al. (2024). Likewise, the perception of belonging to the group and emotional well-being appear to be key elements associated with these relationships, coinciding with

the findings of Nieto and Moriña (2021). Although some students have also experienced certain difficulties in their relationships with their peers, many have been able to resolve the problems that have arisen and improve their relationships with each other, so these situations can be interpreted as part of the relational dynamics established in the educational context. In some specific cases, this difficulty persists. According to the participants, these difficulties are usually motivated by a lack of camaraderie, which reinforces the need to work on this aspect in schools, as argued by Koegel et al. (2012). In this sense, it can be seen that the special education centers where the participants are enrolled promote a climate of support and understanding that facilitates the progressive improvement of interpersonal relationships, contributing to the well-being of the students.

In contrast to the above, if we focus on the relationship between students at special education centers outside school hours, there is a clear discontinuity between the relationships that develop within the center and those that are maintained outside it, as participants indicate that they have little interaction with their peers after school hours. Among the main reasons for this situation are the lack of free time and, especially, the distance between their places of residence, which limits opportunities to meet and socialize outside the center. Thus, when students continue to maintain relationships outside the center, it is usually by telephone or because they live in the same town, which facilitates the continuity of the relationship. Therefore, although participants generally perceive a good friendship with their classmates during school hours, there are various obstacles that hinder the continuity and consolidation of these bonds outside of school hours, suggesting that friendships built in the school environment do not always manage to consolidate in other social spaces.

Regarding specific objective 2, to identify the perception of students in special education centers regarding the quality of interpersonal relationships with peers in regular schools, the findings show that students in special education centers value the experiences shared in joint activities with their peers in regular schools. Participants consider these experiences to be an opportunity to establish friendships, coinciding with the ideas of Hoffman et al. (2021) and Pinto et al. (2019). However, the study highlights the existence of persistent barriers that limit the

development of deeper relationships. Specifically, participants point to two barriers: 1) The lack of opportunities to interact with their peers from regular schools, highlighting a feeling of isolation as a result of the lack of interaction with their classmates. 2) The age of those participating in joint activities with the special education center, as older participants point out that this difference makes it difficult to consolidate friendships.

Furthermore, the relationships established during joint activities between special education centers and mainstream schools do not extend beyond school hours, indicating that, despite establishing good relationships between classmates, friendships are not formed, coinciding with the findings of Biswal and Mishra (2025), Pirker et al. (2025) and Vila-Merino et al. (2024). The students emphasize that the children they interact with outside the center are usually relatives, acquaintances, or close neighbors. Furthermore, according to the study participants, when they do form friendships with other children, these are not usually the same children they interact with during school activities, but in many cases are those with whom they do extracurricular activities or who live in their neighborhood. There are also some participants who hardly interact with other children, noting that they have lost touch with their former friends, as found by Douma et al. (2024). Therefore, although students in special education centers value the attitude of their peers in regular schools during joint activities, interaction is often limited, making it difficult to form genuine friendships.

Learning about the students' perceptions and listening to their voices has provided an understanding of how they experience and represent their interpersonal relationships, as indicated by Fielding (2011), Proffitt et al. (2025), and Vinatea-Elorrieta et al. (2025), allowing us to identify the positive aspects that promote inclusion, as well as those that still pose a barrier. Thus, in line with Messiou et al. (2025), the invaluable source of information represented by the students' voices has been confirmed. Considering the above, there is a clear need to promote initiatives such as those carried out in collaboration with other schools, since, as the participants express, they feel accepted and respected in them, which indicates that, through these activities, values of respect and tolerance are strengthened, as advocated in the CRPD (UN, 2006). In this regard, in line with the

contributions of Mayes (2020) and Vlachou et al. (2024), it can be seen that the attitudes adopted are a decisive element in the inclusion process.

Looking at the participants' relationships with their peers within the center, a quality friendship between classmates can be seen, while when looking at relationships with students from other centers, these relationships vary depending on the degree of participation and interaction between them. The bond established in these cases is usually limited to camaraderie and rarely develops into a friendship as strong as that which develops among students in special education centers. Consequently, encouraging this interaction improves their attitudes and, therefore, school coexistence, but carrying out specific activities is not enough to promote friendship among classmates. This highlights the need to allow for ongoing interaction between all students in order to foster the development of strong friendships. In this regard, the collaboration established between special education centers and regular schools should not be limited to occasional or anecdotal relationships, but rather it is necessary to maintain a frequent and sustained relationship over time, with the aim of fostering the development of friendships between classmates from both centers. It is also essential to provide opportunities to interact with peers of the same age who share similar tastes and interests, in order to facilitate the formation of friendships. However, collaboration between schools tends to be with preschools and elementary schools, thus reducing the opportunities for those in secondary school or PVI to interact with their peers. This highlights the importance of fighting for the right to inclusive and quality education, in which everyone can be adequately served without resorting to segregation.

With regard to relationships formed outside school hours, the study confirms that access to shared leisure spaces is one of the main challenges for students at special education centers. One of the main obstacles identified by the students is the distance between their places of residence. In many cases, students do not live in the same town where the school is located, and some even come from other regions. This geographical dispersion represents a barrier to social interaction and the consolidation of friendships beyond the school environment. Therefore, when they return to their towns or cities, the children they usually interact with in their

free time tend to be family members, acquaintances, or close neighbors. It is true that some of them also participate in extracurricular activities where they interact with other children, although the situation is similar to that of their peers in regular schools when they participate in joint activities at their schools. Although the students say they get along well, there are no signs of friendship. As noted above, greater interaction and continuity in relationships are necessary for friendships to develop. If the student attended their local school, it would be easier to maintain relationships beyond specific moments and to form friendships that promote the social inclusion of students with disabilities.

In short, the results identify a set of structural and organizational barriers that negatively affect the quality and continuity of social relationships among students in special education centers, such as geographical dispersion, limited interaction with students from other centers, and difficulty in relating to peers with similar interests. Consequently, and considering all of the above, it is confirmed that the best location for students in special education centers is the regular classroom, the classroom that is a right for all. In addition, in order to promote the continuity of the relationship outside of school hours, their schooling should take place in the regular school that corresponds to their place of residence.

In this regard, there is a clear need for changes and improvements in our education system to promote the inclusion of all students, especially those who are enrolled in special education centers. To this end, it will be essential to address the concerns, difficulties, and obstacles that the agents involved perceive in educational practice in order to propose effective reforms that respond to the needs of all students in regular schools. This will contribute to the elimination of barriers, generating greater opportunities for socialization and inclusion in their environment.

The study has a number of limitations that mean the results should be interpreted with caution. For example, it only considers the perspective of one of the protagonists: students in special education centers. To enrich the study, it would be interesting to also consider other perspectives, listening to the other stakeholders involved, such as students in regular schools, teachers, and families.

Another limitation that can be mentioned is that the research was carried out in a specific con-

text, so the findings of the study cannot be generalized to other places, as each context is unique and has different characteristics.

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## Authors’ contribution

**Dr. Salvador Alcaraz:** conceptualization, data curation, methodology, project management, resources, software, writing – original draft.

**Dra. Pilar Arnaiz-Sánchez:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, research, project management, supervision, validation, writing – review and editing.

**Elisabet Martín-Seva:** conceptualization, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, writing – original draft.

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