





## International perspectives and trends in research on inclusive education: a systematic review

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### ABSTRACT

Inclusive education of students with disabilities in general education contexts has been a global movement for at least 30 years. We completed a systematic review of articles published in English- and Spanish-language peer-reviewed journals to obtain an international perspective on the status of inclusive education research and practice regarding students with disabilities, as reflected in the literature from 2002 through 2016. Our literature search, which involved two parallel searches to compare and contrast articles published in the English and Spanish professional literature, yielded 2380 articles which were categorised into seven categories: theory, descriptive, attitudinal, literature review, intervention, and non-inclusive. For both the English and Spanish literature, the most two common article types were theory and descriptive. The number of intervention articles, with findings on the efficacy of interventions to promote inclusive practices, was drastically lower in the Spanish literature. Implications for advancing future research and practice are discussed.

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### KEYWORDS

Inclusion; students with disabilities; students with special educational needs; international perspectives; literature review

## Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a key topic in both research and professional practice as well as a pressing issue in countries' education policy agenda (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Echeita and Ainscow 2011; Muntaner, Rosselló, and de la Iglesia 2016). This concept has been theorised and researched across various disciplines, including psychology, pedagogy, and education and has been aligned with efforts to respect diversity in today's schools (Sánchez-Teruel and Robles-Bello 2013). In policy development, there have been numerous steps taken to codify the right to inclusion for all students by engaging all stakeholders (UNESCO 1994, 2008).

There are different conceptualizations of inclusion and approaches to promote inclusive education. Some consider it a matter of placement by substituting the former term 'integration' for inclusion. This approaches focus on traditional procedures to meet the needs of students with difficulties of any kind in general education classrooms (Nilholm and Göransson 2017). However, simply defining inclusive education by a

location or a set of practices is problematic because such definitions can be impacted by shifts in educational practice, context, culture and circumstances that quickly render these features irrelevant and outdated (Forlin et al. 2013). As such, it is necessary not only to consider practices that promote inclusive education, but also the underlying theoretical aspects that define inclusion in schools and communities.

In this sense, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) summarised the conceptualizations given to inclusive education in six main categories: (a) inclusion as concerned with disability and 'special educational needs' (SEN), (b) inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions, (c) inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion, (d) inclusion as the promotion of the school for all, (e) inclusion as 'Education for All', and (f) inclusion as a principled approach to education and society. Although these categories are not mutually exclusive, they reflect the main positions usually taken to address this topic (Messiou 2017). Apart from these conceptualizations of inclusive education, UNESCO (2008) describes the key factors of inclusive education for all students: (a) promoting student participation and reducing exclusion from and for education; (b) the presence, participation and achievement of all students, but especially of those who are excluded or at risk of marginalisation. Overall, inclusive education is a matter of adopting a socio-ecological approach regarding the interactions between students' capabilities and environmental demands, stressing that educational systems must adapt to and reach all students – and not *vice versa*– (Echeita et al. 2017; Nilholm and Göransson 2017; Walker et al. 2014). Other scholars (see, e.g. Booth and Ainscow 2011; Muntaner, Rosselló, and de la Iglesia 2016) stress the importance of reaching the alignment between inclusive policies, culture, and practices, and removing the barriers to learning and participation.

As such, in addition to students with disabilities or other forms of diversity being present, inclusion is also about all students participating in general education settings alongside peers without disabilities (and/or other 'difficulties', as stated by Nilholm and Göransson 2017) and having opportunities of receiving general education curriculum with appropriate supports (e.g. Kurth and Gross 2014; Nilholm and Göransson 2017; Walker et al. 2014). In this context, the general education curriculum involves both academic content as well as other social content, including participation in extra-curricular and other school and community activities. In this sense, we embraced Kurth and Gross's (2014, 5) definition that inclusive education 'means that a student must have access to all of the supports and services he or she will need to participate fully in general education activities and curriculum'. Hence, inclusive education provides a means to move beyond traditional, deficit-based conceptualizations of students with disabilities and other forms of diversity, and move toward a more comprehensive approach to meet the needs of all students (Shogren, Wehmeyer, and Shing 2017; Verdugo 2009).

Of the different perspectives of inclusive education, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education contexts has become a worldwide movement over the last 30 years. Milestone reports from the movement include *The Warnock's Report* (1978), *The World Declaration on Education for All* (1990), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (1994), *The Dakar Framework for Action* (2000), and the *48th International Conference on Education* by UNESCO (2008). Perhaps the most important milestone was reached in 2006, when the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) was passed. The CRPD included Article 24 which stipulated that signatories must ensure students with disabilities 'are not excluded from the

general education system on the basis of disability’ and ‘receive the support required, within the general education system to facilitate their effective education’ (United Nations 2006, 17).

Although international agreements and declarations are important, producing a document signed by representatives of different countries does not necessarily mean that more students with disabilities will actually gain access to general education settings nor does it guarantee that the instruction they receive in general education will be beneficial. In addition to the presence of agreements and declarations, another means to assess the extent to which progress is being made in regard to inclusive education is to examine trends in professional literature. Although it will always be difficult to determine the extent to which the professional literature mirrors what is happening in practice, trends in the professional literature can provide insight into the progress being made in a field. Trends can be identified through systematic literature searches, such as this one.

The globalisation of the field of education and its many subfields (e.g. special education) has been apparent for years (see, e.g. Stewart 2012). International-collaborative research in education and psychology has been continually expanding, particularly over the past quarter century. Researchers from different countries start their work by sharing a common understanding of a given phenomenon, and proceed to identifying shared research goals. The knowledge exchange that can result from international collaboration provides multiple advantages for all participants (Lau et al. 2014).

For the purposes of this systematic literature review, our international team included researchers from the United States and Spain. We shared a common perspective on the importance of inclusive educational opportunities for students with disabilities, expertise in educational research and practice, and a common understanding of inclusive education for students with disabilities, as described previously (Kurth and Gross 2014). Our goal was to review literature pertaining to inclusive educational opportunities that specifically involved students with disabilities.

The purpose of this article is to report on findings from a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles published in English- and Spanish-language journals over the past 15 years (2002–2016). The research questions guiding the review were:

- (1) What categories of articles (attitudinal, descriptive, literature reviews, intervention, non-inclusive, and theory) were most common in the English-language literature and Spanish-language literature?
- (2) What trends have emerged in the number of publications within each article category in and across the English-language literature and Spanish-language literature?
- (3) What countries have published the most articles about inclusion in the English-language literature and Spanish-language literature?

## Method

### *Search strategy*

To address the research questions, we identified a common search. The following decisions were made:

- (1) Two different searches would be conducted parallel to one another: one search of the English-language literature and one search of the Spanish-language literature. The U.S. team, all of whom were fluent in English, conducted a search of English literature while the team from Spain, all of whom were fluent Spanish speakers, conducted the search of the Spanish literature.
- (2) The search terms were defined with consideration for English-speaking and Spanish-speaking contexts. Thus, no attempt was made to directly translate (i.e. word for word) the search terms from English into Spanish, or *vice versa*. Rather, every effort was made to reproduce the meaning of search terms taking into account differences in language structure as well as cultural considerations. For example, in Spain and other Latin countries the terms ‘students with disabilities’ or ‘disabilities’ are not used consistently (i.e. there is not nearly as precise of a meaning for many disability related terms). In Spain and Latin America, the term ‘Necesidades Educativas Especiales’ (SEN) is the preferred terminology when addressing students with disabilities of any kind within an educational setting. This term is linked to the regulations-in-force describing attention to diversity procedures, which in Spain and Latin countries is the process aimed at promoting inclusion off all students with ‘needs’ (Ministerio de Educación Nacional and Ministerio de Educación 2010). Attention to diversity is described in the legislation, adapted in school documents, and is the framework for professional practice to meet student’s needs at the individual, face-to-face level (Amor et al. 2018; Beltrán-Villamizar, Martínez-Fuentes, and Vargas-Veltrán 2015).
- (3) The databases and search terms were specified jointly. For the English-language literature, the electronic databases PsycInfo and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) (two of the largest for English-written education literature) were searched for articles published between January 2002 and December 2016 using the search terms: (a) inclusion AND students with disabilit\*; (b) inclusive education AND students with disabilit\*; (c) access to general education curriculum; and (d) access to general education classroom. For the Spanish-language literature, ProQuest Central and Redalyc (two of the main databases for Spanish-language education literature) databases were consulted, using the same time-span, with the following search terms: (a) acceso al currículo; (b) acceso al curriculum; (c) inclusión educativa; (d) educación inclusiva; and (e) necesidades educativas especiales.

The results of the English-language searches included 1860 potential articles from the PsycInfo database and 3801 from the ERIC database. Out of the total 5661 English-written articles collected, 2078 articles met all the inclusion criteria after excluding duplicated search results (see inclusion/exclusion criteria below). The results of the Spanish-language literature yielded 2780 articles from ProQuest Central and 2234 from the Redalyc database. Of the 5104 results generated through the Spanish-language literature search, 302 articles remained after excluding duplicates and screening based on inclusion criteria.

### ***Inclusion and exclusion criteria***

In screening articles for inclusion, our criteria was focused on core aspects of inclusive education, including opportunities and supports to participate, learn and receive instruction, and to share time and space with peers without disabilities. Therefore, we focused on

peer-reviewed articles that addressed environments where *students are present, participate, learn, and receive instruction and supports in the general education context with same-age peers for all or part of a school day*. To be included in the review, articles needed to target students with disabilities in K-12, inclusive school settings, but articles which implemented an intervention outside inclusive school settings (i.e. special education classroom and/or centres) aiming to promote skills and knowledge that could enhance participation in the general education curriculum were also included. All articles were included unless they were letters, interviews, book reviews, or editorials. Articles had to be published in English or Spanish (depending on the search), and had to be published between 2002 and 2016, in order to examine the scientific literature produced during the past 15 years. Exclusion criteria were also defined. Articles addressing only students without disabilities, articles that did not take place in educational settings, and papers aimed at students outside of K-12 education (i.e. early intervention, early childhood and preschool, postsecondary education) were excluded.

### Article coding

Articles were reviewed starting with most recent year (2016) and moving backward. The English-language and Spanish-language teams independently developed thematic categories to group the articles based on their reviews of the content of articles from 2016. The two teams then met with one another to compare and discuss the thematic categories that were emerging from the articles. After multiple iterations (where two coders independently sorted the same set of articles into categories, and then compared and discussed one another's coding decisions) and renegotiations of category names and criteria, final categories were defined as a way of organising all the articles produced by searching the Spanish and English-language databases. [Table 1](#) provides a definition of the final thematic categories, which included: (a) theoretical, (b) attitudinal, (c) descriptive, (d) intervention studies, (e) literature reviews, and (f) applications of inclusive practices in non-inclusive

**Table 1.** Description of each article category.

Category	Description
Attitudinal	Articles focused on understanding the attitudes and/or perceptions of different stakeholders in regard to inclusive education. Typically, these articles report findings from quantitative and/or qualitative data collection.
Descriptive	Articles that describe, based on quantitative and/or qualitative data, the current status of inclusive education in a school, community, or country. The goal of the analysis can be to describe current conditions or barriers for success. Studies examining the current status of inclusive education (e.g. number of students included in a given context) were categorised into this category.
Theory	Articles providing rationale for inclusive education based on existing or developing theory. This could be applied at the level of country-wide policy development or local policies in schools or communities, as well as by theoretically-driven frameworks for developing professional development related to inclusive education.
Literature reviews	Articles describing findings from a literature review or meta-analysis about inclusive education. The specific focus was on synthesising existing research related to inclusive education.
Intervention	Articles that reported data on student-level outcomes as a result of the implementation of inclusive practice. The 'intervention' could include models of inclusive education or specific practices implemented in an inclusive setting.
Non-inclusive	Articles that described the evaluation of practices designed to promote inclusion, implemented in segregated settings (i.e. special education classrooms or schools). If an intervention was conducted in a non-segregated setting such as a cafeteria, but students without disabilities were not present or involved, the article was coded in this category.

settings. In addition to coding articles by category, the research teams documented the country from which manuscripts originated. When a manuscript involved two or more authors from institutions in different countries, the article was coded based on the first author's institutional provenance.

### Intercoder agreement

For the Spanish-language search, the first author coded all Spanish-language articles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and then coded included articles into the six thematic categories. The second author completed the same process for the English-language search. For reliability, a second reviewer coded a sample of articles from the search on the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and also coded a sample of included articles into the six thematic categories. Due to the vast differences in the number of articles contained in the English and Spanish samples, every included Spanish article ( $n = 302$ ) was coded independently by the seventh author whereas only 1 out of every 20 ( $n = 156$ ) English articles was coded independently by the sixth author independently for purposes of assessing intercoder agreement. Percent agreement was calculated separately for the English- and Spanish-language articles, and in the case of any disagreement the two coders met to negotiate the final coding. For the English and Spanish articles, the initial agreement percentage was 87% and 98% respectively.

## Results

### Categories of articles

Figures 1 and 2 provide a breakdown of the categorisation of articles in the Spanish- and English-language literature. In both contexts, theoretical and descriptive articles were the most common across time. In the following sections, more specific details of the categorisation of articles is provided.

### Attitudinal

In the English-language literature, 25% of the 2078 articles ( $n = 522$ ) were coded as attitudinal, while for the Spanish literature, 5% of the 302 articles ( $n = 16$ ) were coded as

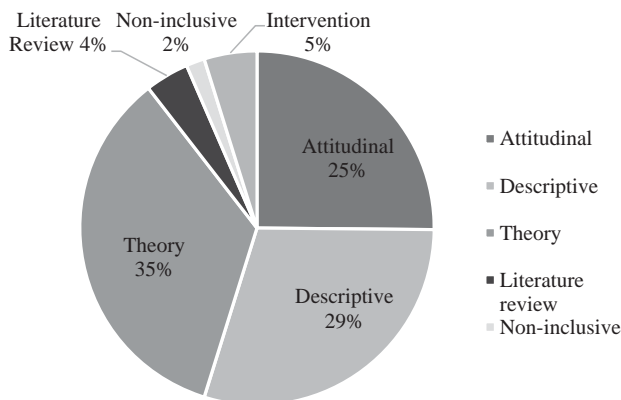
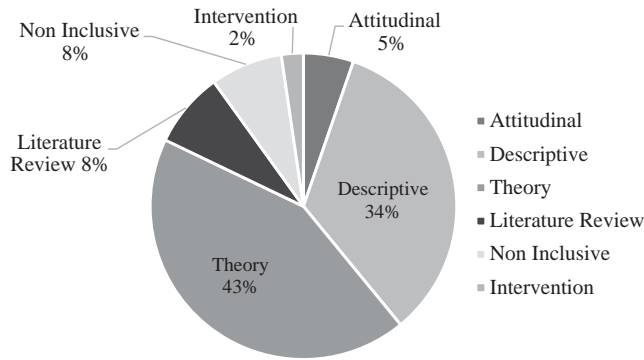


Figure 1. Types of articles in the English-language literature, 2002–2016.



**Figure 2.** Types of articles in the Spanish-language literature, 2002–2016.

attitudinal. The highest number of attitudinal articles was published in the English-language literature in 2006, 2007, 2013, and 2014, with more than 40 attitudinal articles published each year. In the Spanish-language literature, the highest number of attitudinal articles was 6 in 2012. The primary focus of attitudinal studies was examining self-reported data from surveys of pre-service or in-service teachers' perceptions toward inclusion of students with SEN (e.g. Abu-Heran et al. 2014; Bentley-Williams and Morgan 2013; Black-Hawkings and Amrhein 2014). Some studies also examined parents' perceptions or experiences related to inclusion of their children with SEN (e.g. de Boer et al. 2012). The number of studies which looked into perceptions of peers toward inclusion of students with SEN was relatively low (e.g. Georgiadi et al. 2012). A small number of studies explored students with disabilities own perceptions of inclusion (e.g. Shogren et al. 2015 ).

### *Descriptive*

Among the English-language articles, 616 (30%) were coded as descriptive articles, while 102 (34%) were coded as descriptive in the Spanish-language literature. The number of descriptive articles ranged from 23 in 2016 to 72 in 2012, with an average of 41 articles per year in the English-language literature. In the Spanish language literature, the number of descriptive articles ranged between 3 in 2006 and 17 in 2016. Many of the articles in this category reported on observational studies of how students with SEN were included and the barriers encountered in implementing inclusion (e.g. Feldman et al. 2016). Additionally, articles presented case studies of how classrooms or schools changed to include students with SEN in general education settings (e.g. Kaur, Norman, and Awang-Hashim 2016; Theoharis and Causton 2016). A few studies each year described courses in teacher education programmes or professional development programmes to promote inclusive knowledge and skills of pre-service or in-service teachers (e.g. Pape et al. 2015; Pellegrino, Weiss, and Regan 2015). Some researchers also conducted secondary analysis of existing data to examine the inclusive practices and placements for students with SEN (e.g. Kurth, Morningstar, and Kozleski 2014). Overall, the articles in this category focused on describing the current status of implementation of inclusive practices.

## Theory

In the English-language literature, 720 articles (35%), with an average of 48 articles per year, were coded as theory articles. In the Spanish-language literature, a total of 130 articles with an average of the 8 articles per year were identified as theory articles. A majority of the theoretical articles focused on explicating national policy designed to promote changes leading to inclusive education (e.g. Abu-Hamour and Al-Hmouz 2014) or how diverse parties perceived inclusive education within a country (e.g. Dudley-Marling and Burns 2014). Additionally, some articles made suggestions for how to theoretically restructure teacher preparation programmes to promote inclusion (e.g. Shepherd et al. 2016). Other theoretical articles described practical, strategic, or technology-driven strategies that could be used to effectively include students with SEN (e.g. Hart and Brehm 2013).

## Literature review

Literature reviews comprised only 4% ( $n = 83$ ) of the 2078 English-language articles. On the other hand, literature reviews made up 8% ( $n = 24$ ) of the Spanish-language literature. Among the English-language literature, 1 to 16 literature reviews, including meta-analyses (e.g. Kaldenberg, Watt, and Therrien 2015), were published each year, with the exception of 2006 when no literature reviews were published. The focus of most reviews was exploring strategies and practices to improve academic knowledge and skills of students with SEN in inclusive contexts (e.g. Barnett and Cleary 2015). A few articles reviewed studies that examined peers' perceptions and attitudes toward students with SEN (e.g. Leigers and Myers 2015).

## Intervention

In the English-language literature, a total of 100 studies (5%) were coded as examining the efficacy of interventions, while in the Spanish-language literature only 7 articles (2%) were coded under this category. Intervention studies specifically examined instructional supports provided in inclusive classrooms, such as social script training for young students with autism spectrum disorders and their peers (Hundert, Rowe, and Harrison 2014) or instructional supports to enhance mathematical knowledge in general education classrooms (e.g. Kozulin and Kazaz 2017; Peña-Giraldo and Aldana-Bermúdez 2014). The number of intervention studies ranged from a low of 1 article published in 2010 to a high of 12 articles in 2002, with an average of 6 articles per year among the English-language literature. Interestingly, a general downward trend in articles focused on intervention research was seen between 2002 and 2010 in the English-language literature, but beginning in 2011, the number of intervention articles steadily increased, with an average of 8 interventions studies published per year between 2011 and 2016 (see Figure 3). In the Spanish-language literature, 7 intervention studies were published in 5 different years, with most articles published in more recent years, including 3 articles in 2014 (see Figure 4).

## Non-inclusive

In the English-language literature, articles were coded as non-inclusive least frequently ( $n = 36$ ; 2%). A greater proportion of articles were coded as non-inclusive in the Spanish language-literature ( $n = 23$ ; 5%). In 2010, the highest number of studies ( $n = 5$ ) were coded among the English-language literature (see Figure 3) while in 2015, the



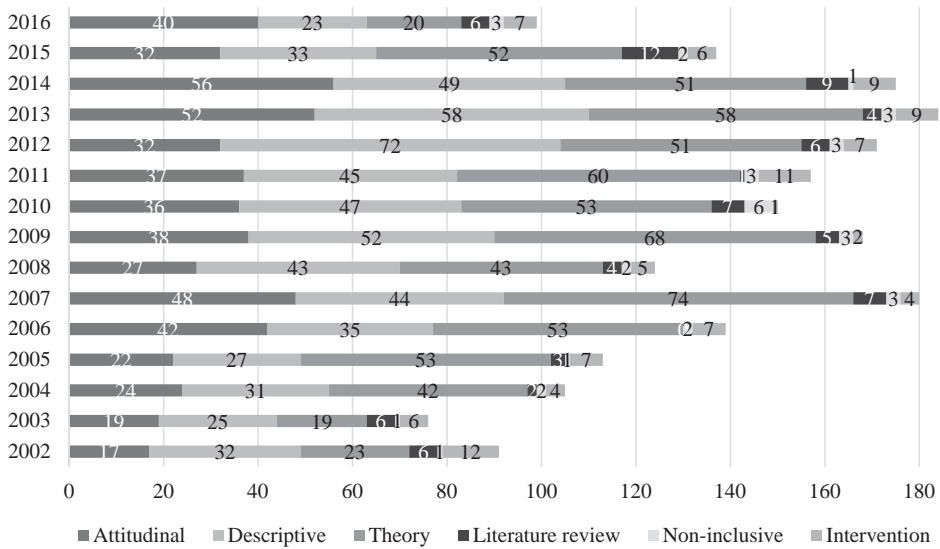


Figure 3. Types of articles by year for english-language literature.

highest number of studies ( $n = 6$ ) were coded under this category among the Spanish-language literature (see Figure 4). Articles coded as non-inclusive tended to use instructional supports that *could potentially* be implemented in inclusive classrooms, but were evaluated for the purpose of the studies in segregated environments. For example, one study focused on improving math skills of students with disabilities, but all teaching and learning activities occurred in a segregated special education classroom (Calik and Kargin 2010). Another study working on teaching phonics to students with disabilities using iPads was implemented in self-contained classrooms (Ahlgrim-Delzell et al. 2016).

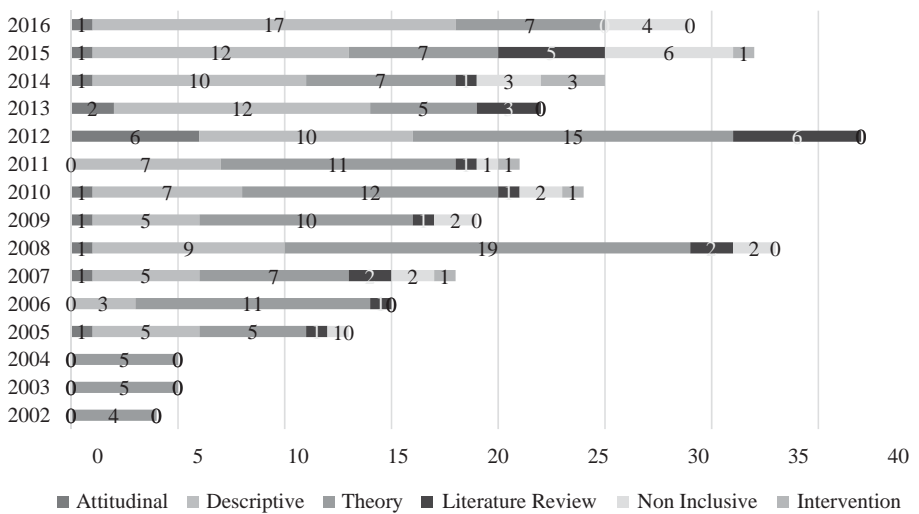


Figure 4. Types of articles by year for spanish-language literature.

### ***Common trends in the English- and Spanish-language literature***

As [Figures 1](#) and [2](#) show, theoretical and descriptive articles were the most common article types in the English-language and Spanish-language literature, although both were slightly more common in the Spanish-language literature. Attitudinal articles, however, were much more common in the English-language literature (25%) than the Spanish-language literature (5%). Literature reviews and intervention studies comprised a relatively small subset of the literature in both contexts, although in recent years (i.e. from 2011 to 2016), more articles have been published that focused on intervention research.

From 2002 to 2016, an average of 138 articles were published per year in the English-language literature, compared to just 20 articles published per year in the Spanish-language literature. In the Spanish context, the highest number of articles was published in 2012 ( $n = 37$ ), followed by 2008 ( $n = 33$ ); in the English context the highest number of articles was published in 2013 ( $n = 184$ ), followed by 2007 ( $n = 180$ ). Moreover, the lowest numbers of articles were identified between 2002 and 2004 in both contexts (see [Figures 3](#) and [4](#)). In more recent years (2014 to 2016), there have more articles published compared to 2002 to 2004, but fewer compared to the 2007 to 2013 time frame.

### ***Countries represented in English and Spanish literature***

The total number of articles across the English- and Spanish-language literature was 2380, and represented research conducted around the world. As a number of countries around the world use English and Spanish, even if it is not their primary language, there were a variety of countries represented within the English- and Spanish-language literature. In the English-language literature, the most frequently represented countries were the United States ( $n = 1387$ ), Australia ( $n = 94$ ), United Kingdom ( $n = 85$ ), and Canada ( $n = 59$ ). Taking a look at the articles published in English-language by researchers from different countries, three such articles were published in 2002, growing to 36 in 2014. These included articles by researchers from the Netherlands, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Hong Kong, India, Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and Nigeria. There was also evidence of collaboration by researchers across countries, such as a team representing Sweden, Portugal, Hungary, Belgium, Romania, Norway, and the Virgin Islands (Lebeer et al. 2012) and another representing Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, and Indonesia (Loreman, Sharma, and Forlin 2013). For the Spanish-language articles, apart from Spain ( $n = 172$ ), the most frequently represented countries were Chile ( $n = 37$ ), Mexico ( $n = 27$ ), and Costa Rica ( $n = 23$ ).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this review was to analyze the publication trends in inclusive education in the English- and Spanish-language literature over the past 15 years to better understand the primary focus of research in this area as well as the trends that have emerged across these two contexts. Only by analyzing these trends can current and future directions to advance inclusive education research be identified and commonalities across the English- and Spanish-language contexts be leveraged.

Taking a general look into the results found in this review, an important gap between the number of theory articles (i.e. those articles providing rationale on how to include and/

or articles defending a position on why to include students with disabilities) and intervention articles (i.e. those papers that actually develop, apply, and add evidences on how a support can enhance students' inclusion outcomes) can be found. In this sense, the obtained data seem to support findings discussed by other authors who have noted the lack of evidence and evidence-based practices in the field of disabilities at general level (see, e. g., Schalock et al. 2017) and in the educational context (see, e. g., Amor et al. 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that this work provides a general overview of the research trends in a given field, and should not be assumed to accurately represent of the reality found in daily practice at schools.

What is more, results from this study must be understood in the context of two critical aspects: the peculiarities of inclusive education and the characteristics of international, collaborative research. On the one hand, the multiple conceptualizations of inclusive education that have already been mentioned in the introduction, have resulted in the authors choosing a specific perspective of inclusive education (i.e. regarding students with disabilities) and definition (i.e. that offered by Kurth and Gross 2014). Second, international, collaborative research not only starts from a common understanding of a given phenomenon but also from a shared goal. In this case, gaining a better understanding of the trends in research on inclusive education and want to compare two professional literature from two languages. These two features determined our starting point as well as the methodology which led to the final data pool analyzed and summarised in this article. Although international, collaborative reviews still remain scarce, the general results presented here are largely consistent with those reported by other researchers investigating inclusive education. Any comparisons, however, must be made with caution, taking into the contextual and conceptual ambiguity discussed above.

For example, Messiou (2017), in a systematic review analyzing the presence (or absence) of inclusive research in inclusive education, reported a high number of articles pertaining inclusive education regarding students with disabilities and with special educational needs, but just a few results addressing intervention studies. Although Messiou (2017) findings go in the same direction of the data reported here, her review contained just a few articles where supports for enhancing inclusion outcomes were reported.

A similar trend at general level can be found in Nilholm and Göransson's (2017) study comparing the research in inclusive education between North American and European high impact journals. These authors found that articles reporting original empirical research were the most common, followed by position papers (i.e. articles with the purpose of arguing an evaluative position vis-à-vis the field). In this case, although the proportion of articles in different categories reported in Nilholm and Göransson (2017) study is different than the proportions presented here, Nilholm and Göransson results are similar to our findings, in the sense that there are two main kind of articles: papers reporting data (with different level of evidence and implications) and evaluative articles (in our case under a mainly theoretical perspective). More precisely, what Nilholm and Göransson (2017) definition of empirical articles encapsulates is what we have called attitudinal papers, descriptive papers, literature reviews, intervention articles, and non-inclusive articles. Although findings from Nilholm and Göransson's study are similar to ours, the methodological differences make direct comparisons between the two reviews difficult.

For example, the main focus of Nilholm and Göransson's (2017) article was to explore what was meant by inclusion in research addressing inclusive education, while our

research started from considerations of various meanings that researchers have given to the word inclusion. This difference in initial conceptualisation resulted in a different breakdown of categories for summarising data.

Nilholm and Göransson (2017) also conducted analyses which were focused on the theoretical tradition of the articles they searched. For example, they considered functionalism as the closest tradition to natural sciences. Typical papers under this tradition tried to find law-like connection between different variables. In our case, only intervention papers could be considered under this tradition. And here is an important difference: our results pertaining interventions were scarce in the two arenas, while empirical-functional papers were the most common studies found by Nilholm and Göransson (2017). Perhaps, the fact that these authors only searched in international impact journals and selected only the most 30 cited articles in North American and European journals, resulted in an over representation in the total number of empirical works under functionalist perspective. In our case, we searched the main databases in English and Spanish-language, and therefore our collection of articles may be more representative of the entire body of published literature on inclusive education.

Nilholm and Göransson (2017) also analyzed the concept of inclusion underlying each one of the articles they studied. There is an important similarity between the results described in their article and the findings reported in this study. These authors indicated that in the empirical papers, the majority of works used the definition of inclusion as *placement of students with difficulties*, whereas positional papers often acquired a broader understanding of inclusive education. We also adopted a placement definition in order to consider articles as intervention ones (and, if a programme or support took place outside general education setting, it was considered as 'non inclusive'). In this sense, our findings were consistent with Nilholm and Göransson (2017), because in our study the intervention papers (i.e. those under an empirical-functionalist perspective according to Nilholm and Göransson description) gave more importance to the placement where the supports took place, while theory articles (often more 'positional') discussed a broader understanding of inclusive education. Perhaps, this trend can be due to methodological issues. Hence, empirical articles may have adopted a simpler definition of inclusive education due to methodological constraints, while positional papers adopted a broader definition because they commonly were less constrained by methodological features.

It is important to state that the starting point and methodology have influenced the results presented here. Therefore, future authors who conduct reviews of literature with a different aim and different methodology may reach different results.

### **Limitations**

Prior to discussing the implications of the findings of this review, it is necessary to acknowledge limitations that must be considered for future work. First, this review only analyzed English- and Spanish-language literature. The integration of other literature and language bases is needed to fully encompass research and practice worldwide and to guide integrated efforts to promote inclusive education. Further, as noted in the description of the countries represented in the review, the United States and Spain contributed the majority of the included articles. Although this result is not unexpected, it reflects an ongoing need to explore research related to inclusive education across language and

cultural contexts. Future work within the English- and Spanish-language literature is warranted to explore cross-cultural differences in research findings. Additionally, the primary focus of the present review was to explore the types and trends of categorical groupings of articles in the English- and Spanish-language context. Future research should further explore the content and quality of research within the various thematic categories, and examine the implications of research for advancing inclusive education worldwide. Lastly, the coding scheme was developed iteratively by the English- and Spanish-speaking teams using the first year of coded literature (2016). High levels of intercoder agreement were obtained for the application of this scheme to the remaining years of the review. It is important to note, however, that alternative coding schemes are possible, and even starting at different years may have led to different foci in the coding scheme. Further validation of the coding scheme will be needed in future work.

### *Directions for future research and practice*

Overall, the findings from the review suggest that across the English and Spanish-language literature, there is a clear focus on scholarship related to inclusive education of students with SEN. Similarities also appear in the themes of articles published over time, suggesting that English- and Spanish-speaking research groups around the world are grappling with similar issues (Ainscow and Sandill 2010). Specifically, theoretical and descriptive articles were the most common in both literature bases. This finding suggests that there is an ongoing focus on providing a theoretical justification for inclusion, and describing the current status of inclusive education as well as models that have been developed to advance inclusive education.

The relative lack of empirical intervention studies focused on establishing research-based practices in inclusive environments is troubling. Our findings suggest that over the past 15 years, research on inclusive education has remained largely theoretical and descriptive, and this remains the case currently. As the field continues to evolve, it is necessary to move beyond simply describing the problem and possible solutions, to testing solutions and documenting implementation and impact that can be implemented at scale (McCart et al. 2014).

It is also critical that work to advance inclusive practices occur in inclusive settings. The finding that a majority of work focused on exploring inclusive practices have been implemented in non-inclusive contexts, particularly in the Spanish-language context, does not bode well for the generalisation of knowledge. This is, of course, influenced by the fact that segregated settings remain a reality for a large number of students worldwide (e.g. Dillon, Underwood, and Freemantle 2016; Kurth and Mastergeorge 2012). Specifically addressing the context-related reality within Spanish-language literature, the amount of non-inclusive articles could be due to the limitations that attention to diversity practices have toward meeting the needs of students with disabilities, especially of those with intellectual disability (Anaya, Pérez-González, and Suárez 2011; Echeita et al. 2017; Verdugo 2009). This is correlated with the placement of students outside general education classrooms (Ramos and Huete 2016), and may have influenced research designs when researchers developed and implemented programmes for enhancing inclusion outcomes within special education contexts. However, more investigation surrounding this issue is needed. Nonetheless, future work focused on establishing effective models and

interventions to promote inclusive education must ensure that research on inclusive practices occurs in inclusive settings (Copeland and Cosbey 2008).

There was a subset of literature focused on attitudinal factors, although this was much more common in the English-language context. Research on the perspectives of diverse stakeholders in inclusive education is necessary, but is not sufficient in and of itself. Moving beyond establishing factors that impact attitudes and refocusing on establishing effective models and interventions that lead to positive outcomes should be a key focus in the English-language context. Overall, the development of theory and describing practices and attitudes are critical and necessary steps to advance inclusive education, but further advances in the form of intervention research are paramount. Such work is lagging behind in both the English- and Spanish-language context.

As research progresses over the next 15 years, more work is needed to define key outcomes that should be the focus of inclusive education research worldwide (McDonnell and Hunt 2014), and a key aspect of this work should be to build collaborative, international research groups that implement and evaluate the impact of models of promoting inclusive education across the globe. When Echeita and Ainscow (2011, 35) noted 'within educational systems only what is measured will be done', they were highlighting the importance of moving beyond describing and theorising possible outcomes of inclusive education, to measuring and demonstrating the impact of inclusive education models and practices (Choi et al. 2017). By doing this work in the context of international collaborations, researchers can also explore cross-cultural similarities and differences.

More work is also needed to explore the factors that influence the state of research within different countries and cultural contexts. For example, although there are more similarities than differences in the English and Spanish literature, we did not examine variations across countries included in each literature base. Further, there were nuances. In regard to the Spanish-language literature, for example, there were higher overall proportions of theoretical and descriptive publications and fewer attitudinal publications. This could reflect the greater emphasis in Spanish-speaking countries on advancing ideals associated with the CRPD compared to the U.S. where CRPD has not yet been ratified.

## Conclusion

Overall, this review suggests the ongoing need, worldwide, to ensure the translation of policy, theory, and descriptive knowledge into the creation and empirical analysis of inclusive models and practices that can be implemented with fidelity and adapted for various cultural contexts. Research is needed that is influenced by existing policy and practice, but also informs future needs and issues related to policy and practice (Sancho 2010). This finding from the present review is confirmed by findings in relation to the implementation of the CRPD that suggest factors that are leading to challenges in implementing Article 24, namely that there is a 'lack of disaggregated data and research (both of which are necessary for accountability and program development), which impedes the development of effective policies and interventions to promote inclusive and quality education' (United Nations 2016, 2). Critical to this effort will be building new international alliances, as well as greater partnerships between researchers and practitioners within varying cultural contexts to allow for the study of translating research to practice and

establishing research-based practices that can be implemented with fidelity across contexts.

In conclusion, the current review confirms the need for ongoing attention to inclusive education of students with SEN worldwide, and suggests a particular need for increased focus on examining and establishing practices that can be implemented in inclusive settings to promote valued outcomes resulting from inclusive education. Moving beyond examining strategies in non-inclusive settings, and building on the foundational knowledge that has been developed related to theoretical frameworks and attitudinal factors, provides a means to better approach inclusive education worldwide, promoting meaningful outcomes and full citizenship for all people, including those with disabilities.

## Geolocation information

Spain, USA, research on inclusive education

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