

Emotions in the Experience of Being a Teacher of a Student Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Los afectos en la experiencia de ser profesor de un estudiante diagnosticado con trastorno espectro autista

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Abstract

Studies show that the knowledge teachers have about autism, and their attitude, motivation, and attachment to their students, affect the processes of teaching and learning. The objective of this study was to explore the emotional experience of teachers with autistic students. Using a qualitative methodology, 14 teachers who had experience with students with autism in a regular classroom were individually interviewed and/or took part in a focus group. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Expert supervision, independent group validation, and convergence with other research were taken as validation criteria. The teachers describe the emotions that characterize their experiences with students with autism as uncertainty, frustration, anger, and joy. They realize that, stages can be distinguished in their experiences depending on the predominant emotion. They say that as they begin to share emotional experiences with students with autism, a teacher-student relationship can be established that transcends the immediate experience and the school context, and favorably changes the way they work with them. Furthermore, teachers expect their colleagues and the psychologist working at the school to support them when they experience negative emotions.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, teaching experience, emotions

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Resumen

Algunos estudios señalan que el conocimiento del profesorado sobre el autismo, la actitud, la motivación y la vinculación con sus estudiantes inciden en los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo explorar la experiencia afectiva de profesores con alumnos diagnosticados con autismo. Utilizando la metodología cualitativa, se entrevistó o se hizo participar en un grupo focal a 14 profesores que tuvieron experiencias con estudiantes con autismo en aula regular. La información se examinó a través del análisis del contenido temático y se tomaron como criterios de validación la supervisión de expertos, la validación con un grupo independiente y la convergencia con otras investigaciones. Los profesores describen las emociones que caracterizan sus experiencias con alumnos con autismo como incertidumbre, frustración, rabia y alegría, y distinguen las etapas en que predomina alguna de estas emociones. Manifiestan que, en tanto comienzan a compartir vivencias afectivas con sus alumnos con autismo, puede establecerse un vínculo profesor-alumno que trasciende la experiencia inmediata y el contexto escolar, y modifica favorablemente la forma de trabajar con ellos. Por otra parte, atribuyen a sus colegas docentes y al psicólogo que trabaja en la escuela la función de contenerlos ante la vivencia de emociones negativas.

Palabras clave: trastorno espectro autista, experiencia docente, afectividad

Teaching work and student characteristics have frequently been the subject of study (Arancibia, Herrera, & Strasser, 2008; Redondo, 2011). In this regard, there has been increased interest in addressing the processes of school students who have a significant difference compared with their peers, as in the case of Autism Spectrum Disorder¹ (ASD). ASD mainly affects social-emotional development, which is why intervention is sought from school age (Attwood, 2009; Ministerio de Educación [Mineduc], 2008; Ministerio de Salud [Minsal], 2011). A common and natural social-emotional space is that which the autistic student experiences together their teachers (Attwood, 2009; Hirsch, 2013; Valdez, 2010). Various working models have been developed in this respect, which seek to improve the social-emotional development of students with ASD and which underline the importance of considering the emotional process experienced by the teachers of such students (Attwood, 2009, Martos, 2005; Mineduc, 2008, 2010). Therefore, this study seeks to explore teachers' emotional experience who work on a daily basis with students with ASD in the context of a regular classroom.

Background information

After the signature of the World Declaration on Education for All in Thailand (Unesco, 1990), the United Nations (UN) proposed working on universal access to education and the promotion of equity in education. With this objective, the Salamanca Statement on Special Educational Needs (SEN): access and quality (Unesco, 1994) underlined the need to include people with SEN who were likely to be excluded from educational systems. Later in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held in 2006 (Unesco, 2006), the barriers that hinder access to education for persons with disabilities were recognized and a commitment was agreed to generate actions to allow these barriers to be reduced. Since the International Conference on Education held in Geneva (Unesco, 2008), the emphasis has been that, in order to achieve inclusive, quality education, it is necessary for nations to guarantee equitable educational systems, where teaching methods are considered that integrate the different areas of development and are consistent with current contexts of life. At the conference, methodological proposals were presented on cooperative learning and social-emotional learning (Unesco, 2009) with the aim of meeting the challenge of achieving equity and quality education for all students, regardless of their social or ethnic background or whether they have SEN.

It should be noted that the policies mentioned above on disability and SEN include autism, a reality that is not foreign to Chile. Hence, the country ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

¹ The term *autism spectrum disorder* (ASD) was used in accordance with DSM-V (APA, 2013) and the word *autism* was used as a synonym.

Disabilities, promulgated by the Law on subsidies for educational institutions and other laws (Ley N° 20,201, 2007), explicitly including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for the first time. Subsequently, the decree was created to set the standard to describe students with SEN (Decreto N° 170, 2010), which addresses the diagnostic process for ASD in paragraph 6, and covers the guidelines to complement school support in chapter V. In this regard, the Ministry of Education has published and disseminated two support manuals to work with students with ASD (Mineduc, 2008, 2010). These guides include definitions and guidelines for early identification of autistic traits and guidelines for the organization and planning of teaching-learning processes. However, Chilean education is currently undergoing a reform and inclusion continues being one of the pillars to be ensured. To achieve that, in addition to the School Inclusion Law that Regulates the Admission of Students (Ley N° 20,845), Decree N° 83/2015 was enacted, which provides guidelines for diversification of teaching and approves criteria and instructions for curricular adaptation for students with SEN. It also seeks to promote the process of inclusion based on research itself and, in this respect, we have the proposals of the Wellbeing and Socioemotional Learning Program (BASE) by Milicic, Alcalay, Berger, and Torretti (2014), teacher cooperation (ULS Blue Book), and the teacher-mediator (Yarza, 2013), among others.

Regarding teaching work with students with ASD, the publications usually indicate and evaluate the ideal qualities that teachers of such students should have, which include the teacher's prior knowledge of ASD, patience, flexibility, and a calm disposition (Attwood, 2009; Fonseca & Cabezas, 2007; Leblanc, Richardson, & Burns, 2009; Ruíz, 2011). This is indicative of the emphasis on evaluating teaching experience rather than exploration of this experience from subjective perspective (Klinger, Mejia, & Posada, 2011). Something similar happens with the emotional dimension of teaching work: although it has been considered an important factor in teaching-learning processes, it is usually proposed as a secondary factor in relation to cognitive and behavioral aspects (Abramoswsky, 2010; Chávez, 2008; Marchesi, 2008). However, calls have been made from various areas of research in education to consider that the emotions of students and teachers are a key factor in the educational process, particularly in the case of SEN (Chávez, 2008; Leblanc et al., 2009; Martínez, Alcaraz, & García, 2010).

In this regard, recent research, such as that supporting the Wellbeing and Socio-Emotional Learning Program as a Development Strategy in the School Context (Milicic, Alcalay, Berger, & Torretti, 2014) and the study by Klinger, Mejia, and Posada (2014) on emotional expressions as mediators of learning, indicate that teachers' emotional interaction with their students involves attitudes and teaching practices that can help or hinder favorable environments for school development, even reaching the point of establishing secondary attachment bonds between teacher and student. As regards ASD, the work by Martínez, Alcaraz, and García (2010) on teaching emotions to students with autism stresses that teacher emotion and the bonding that are achieved with the student will be the gateway to start opening up the closed world of the autistic child towards social interaction and the experience of emotions. There is also evidence in autobiographical literature, as in the case of W. Carlock, teacher of the well-known autistic woman Temple Grandin, who, through the bond he was able to establish with Grandin, managed to guide her to enhance her strengths and overcome various obstacles during her schooling (Grandin & Scariano, 2008).

Given this background, it is undeniable that the emotional dimension has a significant influence on teaching-learning processes. Therefore, it is relevant to ask about teachers' emotional experience who work on a daily basis with students with SEN and especially with students diagnosed with ASD, bearing in mind their particular socio-emotional development and the role of model fulfilled by teachers (Attwood, 2009; Hirsch, 2013; Lozano, Alcaraz, & Colás, 2010; Valdez, 2010).

Methodology

The objective of this research is to explore and describe teachers' emotional experience who work or have worked in classrooms with students diagnosed with ASD. For this purpose and considering that the focus is on the subjective experience of a little-studied topic like ASD (Baylis, 2011; Valdez, 2009), we used a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological paradigm (Martinez, 2006) with an exploratory research design. The research was conducted between 2014 and 2015. It did not use a probabilistic sample of subjects: teachers were sought who were working or had worked in a regular classroom with students diagnosed with ASD in the district of Iquique and Alto Hospicio, obtaining a total sample of

14 participants from public schools (3) and subsidized private schools (11). In order to determine the diagnosis of the students, the documentation was reviewed on the diagnoses of ASD and Asperger's Syndrome. Of the total sample, only one teacher belonged to a school with a school integration project in the process of being created, according to the teacher himself. Another three teachers worked at schools that had support professionals but who were not affiliated to any particular integration project and did not have a specific role in relation to students with SEN. The rest of the sample was at schools that did not have professionals or programs aimed at the inclusion of students with SEN.

Key informants were used to access the sample. The informants were associations of parents and families of children diagnosed with ASD, who gave us the names of the schools where their children studied. At first we contacted 10 teachers; 8 of them decided to take part in the research and the remaining 2 said they had problems with available time. The eight teachers who did agree to participate were given a semi-structured individual interview in which topics were addressed in relation to their affective experience with students diagnosed with autism, their emotional experience, the nature of their relationships with these students, and their relationships with other professionals at school.

The interviews were transcribed on a word processor and transferred as a text document to a software for qualitative analysis. With this tool, from the first interview the data was segmented into units of meaning constituted by paragraphs. Through a process of comparison, the units were then grouped by similarity in relation to the topic which they covered, thus differentiating thematic areas composed of units of meaning referring to the same topic. Then we assigned a descriptor to each topic. Finally, each subject formed a category, with a total of five categories describing teachers' emotional experience with students diagnosed with ASD. These categories were: (a) the importance and influence of emotions on teaching work with students with autism, (b) a description of the emotions felt in this experience, (c) a description of the emotional process experienced by teachers during this time, (d) the characteristics of the relationship between the teacher and the student with autism, and (e) the support relationship with other professionals within the school.

Subsequently, in order to corroborate these results, a group interview was conducted with the eight teachers interviewed, in which the categories obtained in the analysis of the individual interviews were confirmed and enhanced.

Finally, as a validation process with an independent group (triangulation), a focus group was conducted, comprised by six teachers with experience of students with ASD who had not been interviewed in the previous process. The guidelines for the conversation were based on the same topics addressed in the individual interviews. Then, with the transcription and analysis described above, the results obtained in the focus group were compared with those from the first interviews, resulting in saturation of information, thus indicating the closure of research process.

Regarding the validation criteria, the transparency of the findings in the steps of research process we have described was safeguarded. Research also involved expert validation through peer feedback on the presentations of progress during academic and professional events (Zenteno, 2015; Zenteno & Leal, 2014, 2015). Finally, the findings were compared with those from similar studies related to teaching and emotional processes with pupils with SEN and ASD.

As regards ethical issues, signature of an informed consent was considered, along with confidentiality of identity, both for teachers and students to which they referred. Once the study was completed, each participant was given a copy of the results.

Results

The five categories that account for the emotional experience of the participating teachers, in relation to their work with students diagnosed with ASD, are shown below.

Importance of teacher emotion in their experience with students with ASD

For teachers, emotion plays an essential and particular role in their experiences with students diagnosed with autism. They feel that the emotional development of these students is significantly affected, and that this requires the management of their own emotions to contain the emotional reactions of these students, as these students express their emotions differently to most of their peers and could sometimes exhibit unexpected behavior. It should be noted that not all students with ASD react in the same way to similar situations. In this respect, teachers say they have very little training and therefore they turn to sources of support within the school itself or learn from their own experiences in something they call *learning by trial and error*. While one teacher expresses knowledge about the existence of Inclusive Education Plans (IEP) at her school, she said that she was still not sure about how they worked and the method of support. The remaining participants said they had no knowledge of any support programs for teaching children with ASD at their schools:

Nobody teaches us about how children with autism are or how they are going to react, even though they're all different from each other [...] so there's nothing else to do except to learn for yourself, sometimes messing it up or asking for help, but something has to be done (Teacher 10, focus group).

Teachers assume that their role as educators of these students implicitly includes teaching the appropriate communication of emotions, without causing harm to themselves or other students. This function is based on the perception of teachers that students spend much of the day with them and that, in the case of children with autism, they often learn very well by imitation. In this sense, they say that they do not have the necessary training, as although some of them acknowledge that they have attended training or workshops on emotional intelligence, they feel that working with students with ASD is different and requires greater training:

Finally, you also know you have to teach life skills, more so in these cases, because they are children who don't know how to express what they feel, or when they do, they do it badly. So, you have to know how to teach them that, but nobody teaches us, so we have to go around again looking for how to do it (Teacher 12, focus group).

To these teachers, emotion is the main channel of communication with students with ASD. They observe that, once the emotional processes of these students have been identified, their teaching work becomes significantly easier, as this allows them to establish more fluent and assertive communication with them, as well as to anticipate certain situations that could generate negative reactions in students with autism:

When I realized that what was happening was that they became frustrated every time I told them something was wrong and that's why they were crying, then I began to anticipate, so when I saw that they were doing something wrong, first I told them that they were allowed to be wrong and I suggested that they should find new solutions (Teacher 8, individual interview).

Emotions experienced by teachers of students with ASD

Uncertainty. Teachers describe the experience of uncertainty as a state of mental unease and anxiety, associated with the perception of ignorance about ASD and, specifically, about teaching methodologies and the ways of relating to these students:

When you have to deal with a child with autism, you don't really know what to do, what methods to use, if they will speak to you or not. There's a very strong feeling of uncertainty; all day you're thinking about how you're going to do it (Teacher 7, individual interview).

This emotion produces different responses in teachers. Some of them recognize uncertainty as a source of motivation to seek information about ASD and/or emotional support:

That's when I decided to search for information; there was so much uncertainty that I looked on the internet first [...] until I found information on the subject and certain techniques that could help me (Teacher 2, group interview).

Other teachers are paralyzed by uncertainty and are not motivated to search for information and/or support: «In my case the truth is that the more I thought about it, the more nervous I was. I couldn't handle the uncertainty anymore, but I couldn't do anything to get past it, I don't know why» (Teacher 9, focus group).

The emotion of uncertainty is also associated with the teachers' perception of having no certainty about the future of their students with ASD in the short and long term. This even occurs in teachers who say that they carry out good work with their students, which translates into good school adaptation and appropriate fulfillment of learning objectives:

When I think about what will happen to him when he goes to secondary school, I don't know what to think. It's all so uncertain, because you see them as fine now, integrated, learning, even talking to me, but will it be the same afterwards? You don't know if they're going to manage to get out of school or if they're going to have a profession; the truth is I don't know (Teacher 3, group interview).

Frustration and anger. These emotions are described as emotions that occur simultaneously and are experienced with discomfort and distress. They are triggered by the constant awareness of ignorance about ASD, the repeated perception of failure in implementing teaching techniques for students with autism, the perception of disinterest and irresponsibility on the part of the student, and the perception of parental negligence by caregivers of children with autism. When these emotions are associated with the repeated perception of ignorance or failure on the part of the teacher, these emotions motivate actions aimed at acquiring more knowledge about ASD and implementing new teaching techniques that can contribute to meeting the objectives set for the student:

I remember and it makes me angry again. How was I going to avoid feeling frustrated if I didn't know anything about autism and, besides, the techniques that they told me could help stop them from getting upset didn't work for me, until I found one that worked for me, after searching and searching (Teacher 1, group interview).

When anger and frustration are associated with disinterest and irresponsibility on the part of the student, teachers are not motivated to make special efforts in teaching processes, leading to distancing from the student. Student behaviors that create the perception of disinterest and irresponsibility in the teacher and which produce anger and frustration are the failure to fulfill tasks, rejection of support, and repeated and unjustified absences:

As a teacher, when you see that the student doesn't respond, that they don't pay attention or that they simply don't want to be helped, they just have to be left alone, because that time can be used on another kid that wants and needs my help (Teacher 8, individual interview).

Meanwhile, when anger and frustration are associated with parental negligence, this can motivate various actions on the part of the teacher: stop considering parents in the educational process of the student, insisting that parents reorient their negligent behavior, or generating some kind of complaint to child protection agencies. The choice of any of these behaviors is at the discretion of the teacher regarding the judgment of whether the action to be performed will facilitate their work and whether it benefits the learning process of the child:

Why beat around the bush? As a teacher you think about what's best for you and what's best for the student [...] and with the parents it's the same: why insist if, in the end, they aren't going to make any contribution? (Teacher 11, focus group).

I think similarly. Sometimes it's even good to report them, because that helps the child and it gives you more peace of mind, because you know that there will be someone you can work with at some home or a another house (Teacher 9, focus group).

Sadness. This is described by teachers as an emotion of introspection that is triggered when they think about the difficulties that the autistic child and their family must face. The difficulties perceived are discrimination, the possible need to take psychoactive medication, acceptance by parents of the child's condition, and difficulties in adapting to the school context to achieve learning:

It makes me sad. I put myself in the place of parents, so I think it's hard for them to accept that their child has a problem or is different, that they're going to be discriminated against. And that makes me think about how I can help them (Teacher 1, individual interview).

They also state that one should not confuse sadness with pity, pointing out the difference that the latter leads to devaluation of students with ASD, while sadness leads to the empathetic act of being in the place of the student and their family:

But be careful with that, because it seems as if it's pity and it's not pity because we're not saying «the poor little child who's stupid», or that they're sick, but rather it makes you sad when you think about how difficult it is for these children to adapt to school and society in general. That's why you have to guide them, but not doing things for them if they can do them (Teacher, 12 focus group).

Sadness motivates reflection and actions in teachers that are aimed at overcoming the difficulties they perceive in their students with ASD and their families. These actions are aimed at providing support to facilitate learning and adaptation of children with autism to school contexts. These include adapting teaching and evaluation techniques in accordance with the SEN of students with autism, mediation in the child's communication with their peers, and creation of activities in which the student with ASD can enhance their skills:

It made me sad because he was good with the flute, but they never paid any attention to him because they discriminated against him. Then, when I had to be his teacher and I had to organize an event, I went and invited him to play; that was the best. [...] Then I tried to get him to play guitar but to no avail, so I always graded him on the flute, but I kept asking for more difficult songs (Teacher 4, individual interview).

Sadness also appears in some teachers as a possible reason for distancing from students with ASD. In these cases, the sadness that working with these students makes them feel does not allow them to handle the situation, which, moreover, adversely affects them in their personal life outside the school context:

Perhaps what I'm going to say will sound ugly, but maybe I'm not the only one this happens to [...] It turns out that it's really hard for me to work with this type of children. Geez it's because it's difficult not to become involved, and I don't want to take that sadness home with me. [...] I get back home thinking about all the problems they're going to have to make friends or have a family; I don't know, it makes me sad and so I prefer not to work with these children too much (Teacher 11, focus group).

Joy. This is an emotion that teachers describe as the sensation of feeling positive energy, which is associated with the perception of effort, progress, and achievements with students with ASD, which may be related to school learning and personal skills, as well as progress in integration with peers and in social communication:

When he responds well or shows you that he's learning, I'm happy; it's that I've always said he's an intelligent boy, or that when I see him manage to integrate with his classmates, when they invite him to their homes. These things that seem small make me feel really joyful (Teacher 3, group interview).

Joy motivates teachers to continue their work with students with ASD, to perform work oriented to these students outside their working hours, and to make teaching strategies flexible, maintaining high assessment criteria, but taking into account the SEN of the student:

It makes me happy because with effort things can be achieved that others are not capable of. For example, last year he couldn't play, and he said to me, «No teacher, next year I'm going to play, even if it's alone» and he set the tone for me to worry about that, so I stayed after school practicing with him, until one day he played a song on the *quena* [Andean flute] and it was perfect. Well, I felt really good (Teacher 5, individual interview).

Experiences related to joy also have functions of compensation and hope in situations that generate negative emotions, and persistence is enhanced along with the search for new teaching strategies to achieve the proposed objectives:

All the bad things are compensated when he shows you he has learned things that you taught him. When that happens to me, it gives me more desire to keep teaching him. So when he has his bad days, I tell myself, I remember the good days that when he shows everything he knows (Teacher 2, interview).

Emotions as stage markers in teachers' experiences with students with ASD

From teachers' stories it can be inferred that there are various stages during the experience with autistic students. These stages and the transition between them may be determined by the predominance of certain emotions over others.

In the first place, a stage can be identified prior to contact with the student diagnosed with ASD or which takes place in the first encounters. At this stage uncertainty is dominant, which is associated with the lack of knowledge about the disorder of particularities of the student. Faced with this initial uncertainty, the group of teachers who took part in this study describes two ways of reacting, leading to two different evolutions. The first induces the search for information and/or support, leading to the implementation of specific actions in relation to the child. The second way of reacting also results in the search for information and support, but in this case it is motivated by anger and frustration produced by the initial uncertainty. In this case the search for alternatives is a somewhat delayed reaction, which is why the time spent at this stage by teachers is longer. Once teachers begin mobilizing against the uncertainty, either immediately or after experiencing frustration and anger, what follows is usually the consequence of the actions implemented. If the actions are effective, they produce positive emotions in the teacher, motivating them to continue strengthening the relationship with the student and their teaching work; in the opposite case, the experience becomes anger and frustration. At this point the reaction depends on the characteristics of the initial process. Teachers who went straight from uncertainty to mobilization in the first stage usually find new alternatives quickly; however, those who initially went from uncertainty to frustration and anger before implementing actions usually fall back into the initial uncertainty, thus resuming the cycle.

It should be noted that, although teachers recognize these stages and the predominant emotion in each of them, they say that the process is recursive rather than linear and they can go through the various stages in one day:

I hadn't realized this, that there were stages. That is, I don't think they depend too much on time, but what rather happens on a day-to-day basis, because, for example, I remember that with an autistic student I had they went from one emotion to another, and from what I see now, from one stage to another. Well I'd never looked at it like that (Teacher 7, group interview).

Emotions and feelings in the relationship with a student with ASD: The (possible) creation of a bond

It was not easy for teachers to identify the emotions that characterize their relationships with their students who have ASD. There is not much time each day for teachers to explore their own feelings and still less to wonder what ties them to certain students. Despite the initial difficulties, two types of teacher-student relationship can be identified in this group. The first is characterized by being variable over time and depends on the emotions that student behaviors produce in the teacher. So, at a certain time, the teacher-student relationship can be characterized by joy, where positive experiences are shared and motivation is produced in the teacher, enabling them to continue maintaining the relationship with that student; at another time it may be defined by anger, which causes distancing and strains the relationship. Another factor that characterizes this type of relationship is the interest of the teacher in the student, which is limited to the school and pedagogical context, displaying the lack of concern about what happens to the student outside this context. In this regard, teachers acknowledge that this form of relating to the student implies less effort and means that the emotional processes of the student do not have an influence on personal processes beyond the teacher's role:

I prefer it that way, not too close and not too distant. As I said before, I don't really like to become involved, which doesn't mean that I don't support them; I do my job and try to do it as best I can (Teacher 11, focus group).

The other way of relating to students with autism emerges from day-to-day occurrences, where positive and negative feelings are shared with the student; here the teacher's interest in engaging in everyday conversation prevails, along with joint participation in school and extracurricular activities, and in educational support outside the established schedule. This type of teacher-student relationship is characterized by transcending the school context in time and in space, as these teachers seek to establish

a cooperative relationship with the families of these students and even maintain interest in them after they leave school. This kind of relationship produces a stable link, perceived as unchanging despite the emotions experienced by the teacher in their day-to-day activities because affection is mentioned as the fundamental basis of this relationship. While teachers believe that maintaining this kind of relationship is more costly in terms of time and effort and affects their personal life, they recognize the benefits both in their teaching work and in their personal and professional development:

To me, everything has to do with affection. That sustains and justifies all the progress we have achieved; that's priceless and every day it motivates me to be a better teacher and above all to be a better person (Teacher 2, group interview).

Relations and emotions of students' teachers with ASD with other school professionals

When teachers describe their emotional experiences with autistic students, they say that there are times when the uncertainty, frustration, or sadness leads them to seek support or guidance within the school. Although they turn to other colleagues or school professionals to request information about ASD, regarding the student, or about teaching techniques, interviewees agree that what they are seeking is primarily emotional support:

I was going to ask about the child, about what I could do or whether what I was doing was right, and after talking I felt so calm [...] until something happens I went back to ask, and that kept happening, but I suppose that's part of their job (Teacher 3, individual interview).

The sources of emotional support mentioned by teachers are their teaching colleagues and the school psychologist. Among colleagues, they include other professionals with whom they have a relationship of trust and/or friendship, regardless of their experience with students who have ASD. They approach them when they feel that the uncertainty, frustration, or sadness is uncontrollable. The way of doing this is by directly requesting emotional support without prefacing this with the need for information; this is usually done in free spaces in the working day or at a time and place outside the school:

It's because she's my colleague, my shoulder to cry on, my confidant [...] well, we're friends. So every time something overwhelms me with this child, I go to her. [...] When I have a tight chest or I feel that I can't do any more, we go and meet. It's wonderful because you can free yourself of the problems, we go straight to the point and that's it (Teacher 1, individual interview).

This practice is recognized as being informal and unsystematic, and does not, in any case, take place in the context of established practices of co-teaching suggested by Mineduc (Mineduc, 2012). They are basically informal meetings between teachers (even after hours and outside the workplace), with an emotional component rather than a technical component, although technical support is usually provided in that context.

For their part, the school psychologist is identified by teachers as an official support and they assume that technical guidance in autism and emotional support are part of the work duties of this professional. They go to the psychologist to stop emotions such as uncertainty, frustration, or sadness from becoming uncontrollable. First, they ask the psychologist for information on ASD or about the student and if they feel confident during the course of the conversation, they explicitly express the predominant emotion in order to address it. They only use this source of support from the psychologist in the school space and during working hours:

When you begin to feel that things are starting to get complicated, you have to go straight away to the psychologist. That's why she's at the school, to support us, to guide us [...] especially with this type of children. Obviously you're not going to go and cry or anything like that, but you will ask for help to work better with these children (Teacher 12, focus group).

As she says, you don't go to the psychologist to cry, certainly not the one at school, but it's happened to me that sometimes I ask something and I stay there talking about how I feel, and it's like it gives me confidence, I talk about it and it's been good for me; Well, it is their job [...] (Teacher 13 focus group).

In terms of sources of emotional support, the group of teachers who claim to have a bond with their students with ASD that is based on affection identify their own families, and mainly their partners, as

people to whom they tell their everyday experiences with autistic students. They share their experiences and emotions (negative and positive) with them and sometimes seek emotional support, but in no case do they identify them as a source of technical information about ASD or teaching strategies:

Yes, telling the truth, your family is important too, because you become attached to these children and you take those thoughts home. I get home and happily tell my husband about everything he achieves, or sometimes I get home feeling low and I also tell him that and he encourages me (Teacher 6, individual interview).

I tell my partner everything and he waits for me to tell him, to see what this child did today. However, when I need some information or help with something, I go to the school psychologist because he's the one who knows (Teacher 9, focus group).

Discussion and conclusions

To the teachers who took part in this research, emotional processes play an essential role in their experiences with students diagnosed with ASD. Given the particular specific social-emotional development of these students, teachers are obliged to learn, understand, and manage their own emotions in order to be able to get to know, understand, and manage those of their students. Furthermore, due to their formative role, as part of their tasks they assume they need to model the particular emotional expression of students with autism through their own behavior. These elements are consistent with the approach of Attwood (2009) and Lozano, Alcaraz, and Colas (2009) on teachers working with students with ASD and their own emotional development, as this aspect is one of the most complex elements of coping and, at the same time, is one of the most important factors in teaching-learning processes with these students. In this regard, we stress the lack of training that teachers receive and the extensive training that they require on their emotional processes in their professional life, which undoubtedly is a pending task and is not unknown (Abramoswsky, 2010; Chávez, 2008).

The emotions that mark the teaching experience with students diagnosed with autism are uncertainty, frustration, anger, sadness, and joy. The teachers' descriptions of each of these emotions and the actions that they motivate are consistent with the issues raised in studies on emotions and emotional processes (Marchesi, 2008; Milicic et al., 2014; Reeve, 2010). Although most of the emotions recognized correspond to the displeasure end of the pleasure-displeasure scale (Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000), when associating the entire experience with students with ASD with an emotion, teachers report that the experience is mainly characterized by joy, a pleasant and also activating emotion (Van Katwyk et al., 2000). This could be explained by the great positive effect of this emotion (Milicic et al., 2014), which highlights the function of compensation that these teachers attribute to joy regarding negative emotions, increasing the degree of importance that they attribute to this emotion over negative ones. Although it is not possible to completely rule out this positive inclination being at least partly the result of social desirability (Kerlinger & Howard, 2002), on various occasions the teachers interviewed spontaneously and openly recognize situations that could be considered socially undesirable (for example, when they mention that they prefer not to get involved —Teacher 11— or that if they student does not cooperate they should «just be left alone» —Teacher 8), that gives the idea that social desirability is less relevant than genuine expression and that, when they say that the predominant emotion is joy, this reflects an experience with good and bad moments, but which is gratifying overall.

While the predominance of certain emotions at different times of the teaching experience with autistic students could be systematized as a process with stages, this arises only as a hypothesis, since the teachers themselves state that is not a linear process over time, but is instead recursive: they go quickly from one phase to another and in one day. In addition to this are other elements for discussion that remain to be explored, such as the reasons that lead some teachers to go directly from the stage of uncertainty to the stage of action, while others go through frustration and anger before taking action. However, systematizing these experiences in a staged process enables the emotions experienced by teachers to be seen as a dynamic process in which emotions interact with their teachers' own behavior and the results obtained with the behavior and emotions of students with ASD, and also whom the teachers recognize as sources of support within the school. This dynamic is consistent with the model of environments that favor social-emotional development (Berger et al., 2007).

There are two types of relationship established between the teacher and autistic student. The first is of a sporadic nature, with a low level of teacher involvement, while the second transcends time and space in the school context and involves greater closeness between the teacher and student. Milicic et al. (2014) refers to this latter relationship and hypothesizes that the teachers can become a secondary attachment figure for their students in the school context.

This reveals the importance of the teacher beyond their role as an educator, since their work is not only related to the learning of content and pedagogical skills, but also to learning life skills, which is helpful in the case of students with ASD. With this information, teacher training and education again become important in relation to their own emotional development (Abramoswky, 2010; Chavez, 2008).

When teachers feel the need for help and emotional support, they can turn to colleagues, psychologists, and, in some cases, a member of their family. Regarding their colleagues, it is stressed that, regardless of

their experience with autism, what is essential is the degree of closeness they have to it, since they turn to their colleagues when they feel that emotions are overwhelming and emotional support is necessary above all else. In this sense, it is important for teachers of students with autism to be able to establish bonds of emotional closeness with other colleagues in the school context, since, as is shown by these results and other studies on the working relationships of teachers, closeness to a peer can be a significant source of support and emotional wellbeing in particular (Chávez, 2008; García, 2012).

Regarding teachers' requirement for training on ASD and the importance of collaborative work between teachers, it is noteworthy that the teachers do not recognize the implementation of programs in their schools that contribute to improving teaching work with students who have SEN or ASD. In the current context of the country, while work is being done on inclusive education based on policies such as the Inclusion Law or Decree N° 83/2015, it is essential for the teaching practice to have the support of strategies that contribute to collaborative work between peers and professional teams, strategies that would doubtlessly enhance teaching-learning processes (Chávez, 2008; Klinger et al., 2011; Yarza, 2013). Furthermore, they are explicitly encouraged by the country's educational authorities (Madrid, 2011; Mineduc, 2012).

On the other hand, the presence of psychologists at schools has increased markedly in recent times through programs that include them, so we expect them to be an important source of support in dealing with SEN. In this regard, the teachers in this study perceived that school psychologists were primarily a source of valid information on autism and only occasionally did they attribute to them the task of emotional support in order to prevent emotional fatigue. Although they go to the psychologist, maintaining an emotional distance, they leave direct discussion of the emotion from which they are suffering to the discretion of their perception of trust. While this task, which is informally and discretionally attributed to the psychologist, is based on teachers' experience with autistic students, it carries with it the constant debate regarding the definitions and role of the psychologist at schools (Redondo, 2011).

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