

TEACHER MEDIATION AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS STUDENTS' INTERNET USE: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Future educators should have the skills to promote the inclusion and participation of all students in the digital era. This study explores and compares the perceptions of preservice teachers in Chile and Spain regarding their digital competence and preparedness to mediate online risks for students with special educational needs. Grounded in the social model of disability, which emphasises the role of environmental barriers in shaping disability, this research underscores the importance of understanding teacher beliefs to foster digital inclusion and equity. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with 263 student teachers (145 from Spain and 118 from Chile). Participants assessed their digital competence and confidence in managing five categories of online risks: content, contact, conduct, contract, and cross-cutting risks. Results revealed medium-high perceived digital competence, but low self-efficacy in managing online risks, particularly for students with special educational needs. Notably, Spanish participants reported greater preparedness in addressing conduct-related risks. A positive correlation was found between perceived digital competence and self-efficacy in managing online risks, underscoring the need for targeted teacher education programmes to bridge this gap. Participants indicated their intention to use frequently mediation strategies, particularly those focused on guidance and support, while passive supervision (e.g., staying close during internet use) was less favoured. Notably, Chilean participants reported their willingness to engage students more frequently in discussions about their online activities compared to their Spanish counterparts. Despite recognising the importance of digital inclusion, nearly all participants lacked formal training in internet safety for students with special educational needs. These findings highlight the urgent

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need for targeted teacher education programmes that address digital safety and risk mediation for diverse learners, with a particular focus on contextualising training to cultural and educational differences. By addressing this gap, educational systems can better support inclusive digital practices and reduce the disability digital divide.

Keywords: digital mediation; pre-service teachers; internet use; intellectual disability; autism spectrum disorder

RESUMEN

La mediación del profesor y el uso de internet por parte de los alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales: un estudio transcultural. Los futuros educadores deben tener las habilidades para promover la inclusión y la participación de todos los estudiantes en la era digital. Este estudio explora y compara las percepciones de los profesores en formación de Chile y España sobre su competencia digital y preparación para mediar en los riesgos online de los estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales. Basado en el modelo social de la discapacidad, que enfatiza el papel de las barreras ambientales en la formación de la discapacidad, esta investigación subraya la importancia de comprender las creencias de los profesores para fomentar la inclusión digital y la equidad. Se realizó una encuesta transversal a 263 estudiantes de magisterio (145 de España y 118 de Chile). Los participantes evaluaron su competencia digital y confianza en la gestión de cinco categorías de riesgos en línea: contenido, contacto, conducta, contrato y riesgos transversales. Los resultados revelaron una competencia digital percibida media-alta, pero una baja autoeficacia en la gestión de los riesgos en línea, en particular para los alumnos con necesidades educativas especiales. En particular, los participantes españoles se mostraron más preparados para afrontar los riesgos relacionados con la conducta. Se encontró una correlación positiva entre la competencia digital percibida y la autoeficacia en la gestión de los riesgos en línea, lo que subraya la necesidad de programas de formación del profesorado específicos para salvar esta brecha. Los participantes indicaron su intención de utilizar con frecuencia estrategias de mediación, en particular las centradas en la orientación y el apoyo, mientras que la supervisión pasiva (por ejemplo, permanecer cerca durante el uso de Internet) fue menos favorecida. En particular, los participantes chilenos indicaron su voluntad de involucrar a los estudiantes con mayor frecuencia en discusiones sobre sus actividades en línea en comparación con sus homólogos españoles. A pesar de reconocer la importancia de la inclusión digital, casi todos los participantes carecían de formación formal en seguridad en Internet para estudiantes con necesidades educativas especiales. Estos resultados ponen de relieve la urgente necesidad de programas de formación del profesorado específicos que aborden la seguridad digital y la mediación de riesgos para alumnos diversos, con especial atención a la contextualización de la formación a las diferencias culturales y educativas. Al subsanar esta deficiencia, los sistemas educativos pueden apoyar mejor las prácticas digitales integradoras y reducir la brecha digital de la discapacidad.

Palabras clave: mediación digital; profesores en formación; uso de Internet; discapacidad intelectual; trastorno del espectro autista

INTRODUCTION

Currently, the use of the internet and digital technologies has become a central element in daily life, both on a personal and social level. Technologies offer unique opportunities for learning, leisure, social development, and access to essential services, enhancing individual and collective participation. However, this digital environment also presents significant risks for minors and especially for those students who present some type of vulnerability like students with special educational needs (SEN), such as those with intellectual disabilities (Chadwick, 2019). These students face additional barriers when navigating the digital world, due to factors such as cognitive limitations, overprotection, and a lack of adequate support in teaching digital skills (Braun et al., 2025). In this context, the role of educators, particularly future teachers, in mediating online risks and promoting safe and effective participation of these students is crucial. In this sense, teachers' perceptions and beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping the educational provision afforded to students with disabilities. Empirical research

demonstrates a clear link between educators' self-efficacy beliefs and their readiness to include pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Morin et al., 2013). Consequently, understanding prevailing beliefs within school contexts is essential for eliminating those that may inhibit the realisation of students' learning potential.

Digital inclusion and literacy have been increasingly recognised as fundamental rights for individuals with disabilities, positioning them as a critical front in addressing digital divide (Finkelhor et al., 2021). Thus, as described by Paredes-Águila and Rivera-Vargas (2023), in the Chilean context, significant efforts are being made to integrate digital technologies into the educational system. However, despite these efforts, the digital divide persists, and the successful implementation of digital tools faces challenges due to teacher perceptions and the lack of adequate training, particularly when it comes to managing digital risks for students with SEN (Velásquez Castro & Paredes-Águila, 2024). The evidence is similar in the Spanish context (Chiner et al., 2025; Gómez-Puerta et al., 2024). Moreover, digital inclusion not only involves access to technology but also the students' ability to use it critically and safely. Barriers to full participation in the digital environment can be technological, social, and pedagogical in nature, and teaching mediation strategies play an essential role in overcoming these barriers (Hammond et al., 2024; Seale, 2015). Digital mediation, understood as the intervention of social agents (i.e., families, teachers) to manage the relationship between minors and digital media, is fundamental in reducing risks and fostering the safe and beneficial use of the internet (Livingstone et al., 2011). In addition, digital literacy and inclusion have increasingly been recognised as fundamental rights for individuals with disabilities, serving as a critical front in combating discrimination emerging from the so-called 'disability digital divide'. This divide encompasses obstacles to accessing or engaging with digital technologies and the Internet. However, despite the importance of this role, the training of future teachers in their digital competence and ability to manage online risks in inclusive contexts remains insufficient (Gómez-Puerta & Chiner, 2020).

The study of digital competence and online risk mediation in inclusive contexts is framed within the need to ensure safe and effective participation for all students in the digital environment. At a global level, organisations such as UNESCO (2018), UNICEF (2024) and the OECD (2023) have highlighted the importance of integrating digital literacy and online safety into educational programmes, especially for students with SEN. The European Union's digital competence model (Vuorikari et al., 2022) and the DigCompEdu framework (Punie & Redecker, 2017) offer key tools to assess and develop teachers' digital skills, ensuring they can effectively mediate digital risks. However, while the need to develop these competencies is recognised, many teacher training programmes still lack adequate training in the mediation of digital risks, especially for students with SEN (Chiner et al., 2024).

The concept of «digital mediation» includes a variety of strategies that educators can use to supervise and guide students' internet use. These strategies may include active mediation, which promotes dialogue and critical reflection on internet use, and restrictive mediation, which limits access to harmful content (Garmendia et al., 2021; Livingstone et al., 2011). Additionally, mediation may involve the use of technological tools to filter content and monitor students' online activities. It is essential that future teachers receive training in these strategies, adapted to the specific needs of students with SEN, to ensure their safety and promote their digital inclusion (Hammond et al., 2024; Seale, 2015).

While the use of the internet offers numerous advantages, such as access to educational content, digital entertainment, and social interaction, it also presents risks such as exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, dangerous contacts, and risks associated with online contracts. Students with SEN are particularly vulnerable to these risks due to their lower ability to independently manage digital situations, highlighting the need for teachers to adopt mediation strategies tailored to their specific needs (Chadwick, 2022; Flynn et al., 2024). Teachers' risk perceptions can significantly influence the extent to which they foster or restrict internet access for students with SEN. When educators question students' capacity to navigate online risks, they may implement overprotective measures, exercising heightened control over the digital environments to which learners are

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exposed. Research indicates that teachers often regard the internet as an inherently unsafe space for learners with ID and ASD, perceiving the potential dangers to outweigh the benefits of digital inclusion (Chiner et al., 2021). This study seeks to fill the gap in research regarding the perceptions of future teachers about their preparation for mediating online risks in inclusive contexts.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore and compare the perceptions of future teachers in Chile and Spain regarding their digital competencies and their willingness to mediate online risks for students with SEN. Despite the existence of well-established frameworks and strategies for mediating online risks (Livingstone et al., 2011), formal training in this domain remains scarce. Many educators report feeling ill-equipped to anticipate, prevent or manage the specific online challenges encountered by students with disabilities (Gómez-Puerta & Chiner, 2020). Specifically, the study addressed the following specific objectives and research questions:

To explore preservice teachers' perceived digital competence and their ability to mediate online risks for students with ID and ASD.

What is the perceived level of digital competence and self-efficacy among preservice teachers regarding the prevention and management of online risks?

Is there a relationship between perceived digital competence and competence in mediating online risks?

Are there significant differences between Spanish and Chilean preservice teachers in terms of perceived digital competence and self-efficacy related to the prevention and management of online risks?

To examine preservice teachers' willingness to implement digital mediation strategies with their students without SEN and with ID and ASD.

What digital mediation strategies do preservice teachers report they would use to prevent and manage online risks for students with and without SEN?

Do Spanish and Chilean preservice teachers differ in their intention to use these digital mediation strategies?

By comparing Chile and Spain, this study seeks to identify differences and similarities in the preparation of future teachers to address digital risks, as well as the mediation strategies they deem most appropriate for students with and without SEN. This comparative approach allows for broader reflection on teacher training in different cultural contexts, which could contribute to the creation of more effective and contextualised training programmes.

METHOD

Research design

A cross-sectional survey study was conducted to collect data from two cohorts of preservice teachers in Spain and Chile. This type of research helps describe specific phenomena as they occur at a certain moment and within a given context, without intervening in or modifying the variables being studied.

Participants

The convenience sample consisted of 263 preservice teachers, of whom 145 (55.1%) were enrolled at a Spanish university and 118 (44.9%) at two Chilean institutions. The majority of participants were female ($n = 244$, 92.8%), with a mean age of 20.31 years ($SD = 3.86$). Most participants reported having received no specific training on internet safety for students with intellectual disabilities (99.6%) or autism spectrum disorder (99.2%). The primary sources of information on this topic were media outlets and informal conversations with family or friends.

Instruments

The instrument developed for this study consisted of three sections: (a) a sociodemographic section with questions regarding participants' age, gender, university affiliation, and training in internet safety for students with ID and ASD; (b) a self-assessment section in which preservice education students rated their digital com-

petence on a scale from 0 to 10 and indicated their confidence in managing online risks for students with ID and ASD using a five-point Likert scale; and (c) a section assessing the extent to which they would implement various mediation strategies to prevent and address online risks for students with and without SEN. The scales showed good internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from .93 to .97.

Procedure and data analysis

Preservice education students were invited to complete the online questionnaire using any device (e.g., smartphone, computer, or tablet) during class-time. The estimated completion time was under 10 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation, and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Alicante (procedure UA-2023-05-11). Anonymity and confidentiality of the responses were fully guaranteed. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analyses, and t-test for independent samples, utilising the latest version of IBM SPSS.

RESULTS

The main findings of the study are presented in the following sections, structured around the two specific objectives.

Preservice teachers' perceived digital competence and mediation of online risks

Overall, participants perceived themselves as having a medium-high level of digital competence ($M = 7.75$, $SD = 1.56$), with no statistically significant differences between Spanish ($M = 7.65$, $SD = 1.36$) and Chilean ($M = 7.86$, $SD = 1.78$) preservice teachers ($t(261) = -1.112$, $p = .267$).

However, perceived competence in preventing and managing online risks was very low across all five risk categories (content, contact, conduct, contract, and cross-cutting) for both students with ID and ASD, with mean scores below 3 on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 1). Student teachers reported feeling slightly more prepared to address conduct-related risks for students with ID (35.4%) and ASD (34.6%), as well as contact-related risks for students with ID (32.7%), compared to the other risk categories. When comparing results by country, Spanish preservice teachers reported significantly higher levels of preparedness than their Chilean counterparts only in managing conduct-related risks (i.e., inappropriate behaviour) among students with ID and ASD ($p < .01$).

Table 1. Perceived competence to prevent and manage online risks for students with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder

Risk categories	Students with ID				Students with ASD			
	Spain		Chile		Spain		Chile	
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i> (261)	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i> (261)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Content	2.76(1.04)	2.68(1.21)	.578	.07	2.69(1.02)	2.66(1.24)	.205	.02
Contact	2.94(1.06)	2.73(1.27)	1.445	.18	2.85(1.07)	2.66(1.26)	1.295	.16
Conduct	3.05(1.13)	2.61(1.30)	2.911*	.36	3.03(1.16)	2.58(1.25)	3.073*	.38
Contract	2.81(1.06)	2.61(1.28)	1.357	.17	2.74(1.06)	2.59(1.26)	1.007	.12
Cross-cutting	2.81(1.01)	2.58(1.25)	1.636	.20	2.74(0.97)	2.54(1.25)	1.473	.18

Note 1: ID = intellectual disabilities; ASD = autism spectrum disorder

Note 2: *Significant at $p < .01$

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A statistically significant positive correlation was found between perceived digital competence and the ability to manage online risks for students with ID ($r = .325, p < .001$) and ASD ($r = .349, p < .001$). The more confident preservice teachers felt about their digital competence, the more prepared they believed they were to prevent and manage online risks.

Preservice teachers' willingness to implement digital mediation strategies

Regarding digital mediation, student teachers reported that they would frequently use all the proposed strategies to prevent and manage online risks for all students (both with and without SEN), with most ratings above 4 on a 5-point Likert scale. The strategies most highly endorsed included teaching safe internet use, establishing classroom rules, assisting students with difficulties in finding information online, and supporting them when they encounter problems on the internet (see Table 2). Conversely, the strategy of staying physically close to students while they use the internet was reported as being used less frequently.

Table 2. Preservice teachers' willingness to implement digital mediation strategies for students without special educational needs and students with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder

	Students without SEN		Students with ID		Students with ASD	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Talk about what they do on the internet.	4.01	0.84	4.02	0.90	4.00	0.93
2. Stay close to the students when they use the Internet.	3.63	1.03	3.91	0.94	3.87	0.95
3. Set classroom rules for internet use.	4.43	0.75	4.40	0.80	4.40	0.83
4. Offer help to students if they have difficulties in doing something or locating information on the internet.	4.56	0.79	4.61	0.74	4.56	0.84
5. Teach students safe ways to use the internet.	4.56	0.82	4.60	0.76	4.56	0.82
6. Teach students how to behave appropriately online.	4.44	0.81	4.47	0.80	4.45	0.84
7. Talk about which websites are appropriate and which are not.	4.30	0.91	4.33	0.88	4.32	0.92
8. Talk about certain risks on the internet (e.g., cyberbullying, data theft).	4.40	0.82	4.43	0.81	4.43	0.83
9. Teach students what to do if they are worried about something happening to them on the internet.	4.47	0.80	4.51	0.77	4.49	0.81
10. Help students if they have had any problems on the internet.	4.60	0.74	4.60	0.72	4.59	0.78

Note: SEN = special educational needs; ID = intellectual disabilities, ASD = autism spectrum disorder

Statistically significant differences ($p < .01$) were found between Spanish and Chilean participants for only three of the digital mediation strategies. Specifically, Chilean preservice teachers reported a greater likelihood of using strategies such as talking to students about their online activities [SEN: $t(261) = -2.154, p = .032$, Cohen's $d = .27$; ID = $t(261) = -2.751, p = .006$, Cohen's $d = .34$; ASD = $t(261) = -2.323, p = .021$, Cohen's $d = .29$], discussing safe and unsafe websites [ID = $t(261) = -2.895, p = .004$, Cohen's $d = .36$; ASD = $t(261) = -2.356, p = .019$, Cohen's $d = .30$], and addressing the risks associated with internet use [SEN: $t(261) = -2.347, p = .020$, Cohen's $d = .29$; ID = $t(261) = -2.501, p = .013$, Cohen's $d = .31$; ASD = $t(261) = -2.045, p = .042$, Cohen's $d = .25$], compared to their Spanish counterparts (Table 3). These differences were observed for students without SEN as well as for those with ID and ASD.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of digital mediation strategies showing statistically significant differences between Spanish and Chilean preservice teachers

	Spain			Chile		
	SEN	ID	ASD	SEN	ID	ASD
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>
Talk about what they do on the internet.	3.91(0.84)	3.88(0.86)	3.88(0.88)	4.14(0.84)	4.19(0.92)	4.14(0.98)
Talk about which websites are appropriate and which are not.	4.21(0.89)	4.19(0.89)	4.20(0.89)	4.42(0.92)	4.50(0.84)	4.47(0.93)
Talk about certain risks on the internet (e.g., cyberbullying, data theft).	4.30(0.81)	4.32(0.84)	4.33(0.85)	4.54(0.82)	4.57(0.75)	4.54(0.80)

Note: SEN = special educational needs; ID = intellectual disabilities, ASD = autism spectrum disorder

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore and compare the perceptions of future teachers in Chile and Spain regarding their digital competence and preparedness to mediate online risks for students with SEN.

Regarding digital competence and self-efficacy in digital mediation, the results indicate a positive relationship between both variables, aligning with previous studies that suggest higher digital competence is associated with greater confidence in managing online risks (Morin et al., 2013). This positive relationship highlights the essential role of targeted teacher training programmes. While teachers reported medium-high levels of digital competence, their perceived competence in managing online risks was notably lower, emphasising the need for training programmes that not only enhance basic digital skills but also focus on developing educators' abilities to mediate online risks, particularly for students with SEN. Despite their general sense of competence in digital skills, teachers expressed low self-efficacy in managing risks such as inappropriate content, unwanted contacts, harmful behaviours, fraud, and other cross-cutting risks. This reveals a significant gap in teacher training, particularly in addressing these critical areas of online safety. Although digital competence is increasingly recognised as essential for educators, the lack of formal training in online risk mediation, specifically tailored to students with SEN, remains a crucial gap. This gap underscores the urgent need for teacher education programmes that not only enhance digital skills but also focus on practical strategies for addressing online risks in inclusive educational settings. Teacher education must be aligned with current technological challenges, with an emphasis on ensuring digital safety and fostering inclusive practices. Such programmes should equip educators with the tools and confidence needed to address complex digital risks effectively, particularly for students with SEN. These findings stress the need for focused professional development that addresses both digital skills and pedagogical strategies required to navigate these risks successfully.

Significant differences between Spanish and Chilean future teachers regarding the mediation strategies they would employ highlight how variations in educational and cultural contexts shape their approaches to dig-

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ital safety. For example, Chilean teachers were found to engage more frequently in discussions about safe and unsafe websites, reflecting a stronger emphasis on fostering critical reflection in students about their online behaviour, rather than relying only on supervision. This finding suggests that cultural and educational frameworks play a crucial role in shaping teachers' perceptions of how to address digital safety. In addition, Chilean teachers' greater focus on student engagement with online activities and risks reflects a more proactive approach to digital safety. These results underscore the need for teacher training programmes to be contextualised, ensuring that mediation strategies align with local educational practices and cultural norms. As highlighted by Finkelhor et al. (2021), incorporating cultural context is crucial to the effectiveness of digital risk mediation strategies. Such an approach could significantly enhance the effectiveness of digital risk mediation training across diverse educational settings.

Implications

Findings of this study have important implications for educational practice. First, they highlight the urgent need for teacher training programmes that include specific training on online risk mediation for students with SEN. These programmes should focus not only on general digital competence but also on teachers' ability to manage online risks effectively, tailored to students with SEN. Additionally, training interventions should emphasise the use of digital tools that allow for more reflective and critical supervision, rather than strictly restrictive control. Regarding cultural differences between Chile and Spain, teacher training should consider the specific educational and cultural contexts, as these differences may influence future teachers' strategies and attitudes toward digital risk mediation.

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the sample used was a convenience sample of preservice teachers, which limits the generalisation of the results to other educational contexts or practicing teachers. Furthermore, the measurement of digital competence and self-efficacy relied on participants' self-report, which could have introduced biases. Another limitation is the lack of a deeper assessment of participants' prior training in online risk mediation, as most future teachers had not received specific training in this area.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of teacher training in digital risk mediation on educators' practices in the classroom. Specifically, longitudinal studies could assess how sustained professional development influences the ability of teachers to adapt digital risk mediation strategies in diverse cultural and educational contexts.

Conclusions

This study reveals that, while future teachers in both Spain and Chile report medium-high digital competence, their ability to manage online risks for students with SEN remains insufficient. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive teacher training programmes that specifically address digital safety and risk mediation strategies, ensuring educators are well-equipped to support students with SEN. Additionally, cultural differences between countries like Spain and Chile emphasise the importance of contextualising teacher training programs to local educational practices, ensuring that digital mediation strategies effectively meet the needs of all students.

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