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Teacher professional dispositions as viewed by teachers in Spain: Is a generational perspective relevant?

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Abstract

There is a growing interest in teacher quality, which must encompass teacher diversity, including a more age-diverse and ageing teacher workforce. Little is known about how generational change among teachers influences professional dispositions, which are key to teacher quality. This qualitative study investigated how young beginner, mature veteran and older retired teachers in Spain characterise generational groups of teachers according to their professional dispositions. A thematic analysis of data from discussion groups and interviews (n = 24 and n = 60, respectively) showed that the participants (n = 147) identified and had a similar understanding of two core professional dispositions: a sense of vocation and the engagement that it promotes. It was also found that they attributed differences to age, career path, and significant shared experiences. This suggests that, in their perception, these aspects shape their notion of teacher generations, which is important for understanding the contextual and changing nature of professional dispositions.

Keywords Teacher quality · Teacher diversity · Teacher dispositions · Generations · Teacher vocation · Teacher engagement

Introduction

Quality teachers have been considered crucial to an inclusive and equitable quality education, which is at the core of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). While there

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is no single, generally accepted definition of teacher quality, widespread consensus exists on its multidimensional nature (Kennedy, 2008; Witter & Hattie, 2024) and key dimensions (Snoek, 2021). Together with knowledge and skills, professional dispositions have often been highlighted as core dimensions of teacher quality (Schussler, 2022).

Teacher diversity can also make a significant contribution to an inclusive and equitable quality education (Brussino, 2021). It therefore remains a major area of concern and is garnering increasing attention worldwide (Keane et al., 2022). This is another multidimensional concept (Cochran-Smith, 2022) that has been used to address differences between members of a social unit in aspects which define them as members of identity groups (Bell & Leopold, 2024; Mor Barak, 2022), including those that have drawn most attention in explorations of teacher diversity: race, ethnicity, and gender (Keane et al., 2022). Furthermore, these surface-level diversity dimensions may be underpinned by deep-level dimensions, such as experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and perspectives (Jansen & Searle, 2021; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). All these differences in diversity dimensions are becoming increasingly valued (Bell & Leopold, 2024) and viewed as potential sources of teacher strengths (Dwyer et al., 2024; Ferdman, 2014) that can enhance the quality of education in inclusive and equitable ways (Yip & Saito, 2023). Some professional dispositions have also been included among these strengths (Arar & Tlili, 2024; Ehrich et al., 2020). In addition to having a direct impact on teaching and student learning (Carver-Thomas, 2018), these strengths may also have an indirect impact on quality of education through improving teacher quality, as teachers can mutually benefit from sharing and learning from them (Ferdman, 2014; Yip & Saito, 2023).

Age-related diversity is a dimension of teacher diversity to be considered more closely (Brussino, 2021; Keane et al., 2022). This diversity dimension is expected to become increasingly important given the demographic changes occurring in many countries (Boehm et al., 2014; Köllen, 2021). It is also especially important in contexts around the world where there is an increasingly age-diverse teaching workforce, with a rising proportion of teachers approaching retirement (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). However, age is a seemingly surface-level dimension comprising various interconnected aspects to be considered and has been conceptualised in a variety of connected ways that inform age diversity (Standifer & Lester, 2019; Urick, 2017). Members of a workforce can differ in a number of respects, including chronological age and ageing-related changes; time in an occupation, a job, and/or an organisation, with the ensuing experience and expertise gained; and generational membership (Parry, 2018). There is no evidence to suggest that a teacher's chronological age is a key factor influencing the quality of education. However, teaching experience is often regarded as having a significant impact on both the quality of teachers and the education they deliver (Brussino, 2021). While teaching experience has been commonly understood to be the number of years in the occupation, this has had limited empirical support (Gore et al., 2024). Teaching experience can also be understood as the experience of facing different situations and work in various contexts (Churchward &

Willis, 2019; Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2020), including time contexts (Kerlchtermans, 2014). Hence, teaching experience may vary as a consequence of age and progression across professional stages in different positions or schools, but also due to a teacher's membership of a certain generation. Hargreaves (2005) stated that teachers and their experiences 'are defined not just by their age or even career stage, but also by generation', since 'the time of one's life is also intricately connected to the life of one's times' (p. 968). However, there is a lack of studies that link teacher quality to their generations (Mikušková, 2023), despite each generation having distinctive strengths that are as unique to them as their experiences have been (Walker, 2009). Age diversity ultimately refers to a potentially valuable variety of experiences and other associated strengths, including professional dispositions, and can especially contribute to cross-fertilisation and to their integration (Kearney et al., 2009). Taking advantage of this diversity can be especially valuable when faced with a loss of strong teachers due to the retirement of a growing number of older members of the profession (Goodson, 2003).

Our study investigates the professional dispositions of teachers as they develop over time, since they are often considered important for teaching quality, as noted above. It seeks to offer additional insights into the diversity in these dispositions (Ehrich et al., 2020) among differently-aged teachers at different career stages, who also represent various generations. The context of the study is the education system in Spain, which illustrates the growing efforts to assess and improve teacher quality (López-Gómez et al., 2020) within a context of an increasingly age-diverse and ageing teaching workforce (Consejo Escolar del Estado [State School Council], 2023). The following sections review the literature on teacher professional dispositions and teacher generations. A theoretical framework is then presented that explores how professional dispositions can be influenced generationally.

Professional dispositions

Dispositions have been defined as behavioural tendencies underpinned by beliefs, values, and attitudes (Ehrich et al., 2020; West et al., 2020). Although there are multiple ways of conceptualising teachers' dispositions (Bair, 2017; Strom et al., 2019), they have been described as: a tendency to act (Yang & Markauskaite, 2023); an inclination to behave in particular ways (von Hohenberg & Broderick, 2021); and an orientation underlying how to act (Jensen et al., 2023), among others. However, beliefs, values, and attitudes matter in these tendencies, as these are guided by them (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Educators [NCATE], 2002).

Nevertheless, there is a lack of agreement on the specific dispositions that are the most important for teaching. Multiple, somewhat overlapping dispositions have been identified and constructed in both broader and narrower terms (von Hohenberg & Broderick, 2021). The challenge to provide an inclusive and equitable quality education for diverse students in many jurisdictions has been influential in focusing the attention of policymakers and scholars on dispositions for social justice (O'Neill et al., 2014). According to Villegas (2007), the fundamental disposition informed by this principle is the tendency to act in ways that give all students

access to knowledge. Other more specific dispositions include social awareness of self and of others, as well as of inequity; empathy; caring and respectful relationships, and a strong commitment to support students' success, to cite just a few examples (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2016; Jensen et al., 2023). Furthermore, passion for teaching and commitment are two additional examples of connected dispositions related to those highlighted by the participants in our study (Crosswell & Elliott, 2004; Gist, 2014; Zhang, 2019). Passion has been defined as a strong inclination toward a specific object, activity, concept or person that one loves, finds important and meaningful, to which one commits time and energy, and that is part of one's identity (Vallerand et al., 2024). Teacher commitment can be defined as a strong connection that directs behaviour toward various targets such as the teaching profession, the school, or certain goals (e.g., social justice) (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Moraal et al., 2024). Other types of dispositions have also been identified, including various moral and ethical dispositions (Bullough, 2023), intellectual dispositions (McDonough & McGraw, 2019), and dispositions regarding disciplines or subjects (Clegg et al., 2023).

Professional dispositions are desirable characteristics because they are considered instrumental to effective teaching (West et al., 2020). There is limited empirical evidence of their impact on teaching and student outcomes (O'Neill et al., 2014; West et al., 2020), which has been attributed to the complexity and elusiveness of teacher dispositions and a dearth of suitable instruments to assess them (West et al., 2020). Nevertheless, evidence exists that dispositions can contribute to shape not only instructional practices, but also the learning environment where instruction occurs, which, in turn, positively influence student experience and outcomes, including student achievement and social and emotional learning (Bradley et. al., 2020; Clegg et al., 2023; Warren et al., 2022). These impacts may overlap, as illustrated in a study with teachers considered to be effective in terms of academic success for students based on standardised test scores (Thompson et al., 2019). According to this study, these teachers actively engaged their students and developed rapport and genuine care for them. Furthermore, their use of teacher-centred practices such as direct instruction and teacher control, considered counter to a more student-centred teaching, was associated with what teachers believed to be appropriate for their students, who were largely from low-income backgrounds. However, teachers' dispositions can also have a negative impact on the quality of education and result in undesirable outcomes, particularly in the domain of social and emotional learning (Jennings & Frank, 2015). For example, a study found that some teachers entered classrooms with dispositions that resisted social justice, which were likely to hinder the use of effective multicultural educational practices and reduce multicultural sensitivity and responsiveness in their teaching (Hill-Jackson & Lewis, 2010).

Teacher dispositions have been mainly studied in pre-service candidate and beginner teachers and less often in older and experienced teachers (O'Neill et al., 2014), although they have been increasingly seen as changing and even developing over time (Diez & Murrell, 2010; Strom et al., 2019; Yang & Markauskaite, 2023). Their dynamic character has been linked to the influence that the context has on them (Carroll, 2012). Dispositions grow as each teacher acts, reflects, and learns (Diez & Murrell, 2010). However, this development occurs while interacting with

a social context or set of circumstances (Bair, 2017; Diez & Murrell, 2010), which may be also associated with a particular time frame (Freeman, 2007). Dispositions are connected to experiences that have taken and continue to take place within that context (Bair, 2017). More specifically, these experiences usually occur in either direct or indirect interactions with other people, especially other colleagues, and dispositions are related to them (Truscott & Stenhouse, 2022). Therefore, dispositions develop both individually and collectively (Strom et al., 2019). Experiences may strengthen some dispositions (including less desirable ones), while they also may weaken or suppress others (Bair, 2017; Truscott & Stenhouse, 2022). Nevertheless, desirable dispositions might be cultivated in appropriate professional environments (Fonseca-Chacana, 2019). However, there has been little research and consensus on how dispositions develop in interaction with context (Ehrich et al., 2020; Yang & Markauskaite, 2023).

Generations among teachers

The complex concept of generation has multiple meanings, but it can be broadly defined as a cohort of similarly aged people sharing common unique experiences of specific historical circumstances at similar stages in their lives; these experiences lead to similar beliefs, values, and attitudes and, hence, certain dispositions (Costanza et al., 2012; Kupperschmidt, 2000). The concept of generation has also been linked to a group that has engaged in an occupation at comparable stages of their professional careers within a similar time frame (Gibson, 2015). This study characterises a teacher generation as a group of teachers who (1) have taught during a specific shared time period, concurrently undergoing a series of career stages; (2) share some experiences in specific circumstances related to and important for their work; and (3) have similar beliefs, attitudes and values associated with these experiences (Stone-Johnson, 2016).

Few studies have linked teachers to their generations (Forde & McMahon, 2019; Stone-Johnson, 2016). These have characterised teachers as being part of different groups according to their connection with generational categories (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials) and, to a lesser extent, made comparisons between them (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Stone-Johnson, 2016; Tang et al., 2020). These studies have identified characteristics associated with the corresponding categories. However, these generational categories have been controversial. While some empirical evidence has suggested that generational categories are associated with differences in beliefs, values, or attitudes (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Parry & Urwin, 2011), a number of issues have been raised. Generations are often regarded as labels used to categorise individuals into groups by birth between specific years, employed as cutoffs—albeit not consistently. There is an implicit a priori assumption that years of birth are a core driver of distinctive characteristics common to those born around the same time that make them different from those born at a different time (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; Parry & Urwin, 2021). Moreover, the limited and mixed empirical evidence regarding differences in

individual outcomes—such as values, attitudes, and behaviours—between the so-categorised groups (Ravid et al., 2025) can also be attributed to other factors. Empirical studies often struggle to isolate whether the observed differences are driven by age, period, or cohort (APC) effects. These effects respectively refer to variations associated with ageing or progression through the life course, significant events or phenomena affecting everyone during a specific time frame, and shared characteristics of birth cohorts (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; Parry & Urwin, 2021). Career effects have not been specifically considered (Brinck et al., 2020; Parry & Urwin, 2011). Furthermore, segmentation into generational categories has been deemed to be stereotyping (Parry & Urwin, 2021).

Other studies have dispensed with them and associated generational groups with experiences shared in circumstances related to one or several periods of educational reform, such as neoliberal reforms (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Wilkins, 2011). These studies have suggested that policy changes affect the work of different teacher cohorts in different ways. Wilkins et al. (2021) argued that as neoliberal reforms of education have become embedded into and have informed schools, a neo-performative generation of teachers with no experience of a pre-performative system has emerged. In this process, a performative model of professionalism, including distinctive values and practices, has increasingly become normalised, while a so-called traditional model characterised by vocational commitment has become devalued and diluted.

Numerous studies have focused on teacher career paths (Raduan & Na, 2020), although only a few of them have explored change in dispositions through career stages. This limited research has been focused on pre-service and early-career teachers (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016) and has not usually considered generational memberships (Forde & McMahon, 2019). Whereas career paths are highly significant, incorporating a generational perspective can provide valuable insight into progression throughout teachers' careers and expand our understanding of them (Greenhaus et al., 2019). A career has often been understood as a sequence of personal development that takes place over the course of professional life, which involves progressing through stages characterised by certain knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Bayer et al., 2009; Lynn, 2002). This approach to careers has often had an individual focus (McDonald & Hite, 2023) and has not adequately considered the sociohistorical period in which careers unfold (Hammarström, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2014). However, economic, political, and social changes tied to a particular sociohistorical period that are shared by teachers of the same generation at a specific stage in their lives can also shape their experiences and, consequently, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they entail (Hammarström, 2018). As a result, teachers from the same generation may differ from those of earlier and later generations not only due to the broader changes they experienced but also in terms of their career trajectories—such as early career experiences—and the associated knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Moreover, these changes can influence the nature of careers across successive generations, including the stages that comprise them (Parry, 2018).

Dispositions and teacher generations

Only a few studies have suggested that teacher generations can play a role in professional dispositions. Teacher generations are likely to share not only a certain level of knowledge and skills (e.g., technological), but also beliefs, values, and attitudes affecting their behaviour, which causes differences from one another (Walker, 2009). Stone-Johnson (2016) found that a generational group of teachers held similar understandings about their jobs that affected how they performed their duties. There is evidence that these groups shared work values as well (Tang et al., 2020). Motivation and commitment have also been found to identify teachers as being part of a generation (Stone-Johnson, 2016; Tang et al., 2020). In addition, some research has reported on differences in these aspects when comparing teachers linked to different generations (Rinke, 2009). Belonging to a generation may inform an individual's orientation toward the teaching profession. An emphasis on social service and a sense of vocation has been identified in older teacher cohorts, while efficient and compliant technical delivery has been identified in younger cohorts (Müller et al., 2011).

Little is thus known on how teacher generations influence professional dispositions. There is a need for further research to explore these dispositions from this perspective. Dispositions are often seen as internal personal qualities which may also be influenced by broader generational dispositions that may be constructed by and shared within groups of teachers. This study's contribution relates to the connections between teacher dispositions and generational dispositions. Understanding these connections and how they develop can provide a greater understanding of age diversity among teachers which, in turn, could promote intergenerational collaboration and enhance their professional growth. Three additional contributions to the literature can be highlighted, which seek to fill some gaps indicated in this literature review. To compensate for the lack of consensus on the dispositions that are most important for teaching, this study draws on the views of teachers themselves (West et al., 2020). It also draws on teachers' understanding of the construct 'generation'. Additionally, it contributes to the exploration of professional dispositions of older and more experienced teachers and how these dispositions develop over time, influenced by context and experience. Finally, it focuses not only on under-researched generational diversity among teachers but also on the similarities between them, as they have been under-addressed in generational research (Lyons et al., 2019).

Theoretical framework

This study draws on a perceptual approach to teacher professional dispositions (Combs et al., 1974; Wasicsko, 2007). Within this approach, dispositions are defined as perceptions, and both terms are even used interchangeably (Wasicsko, 2007). One of its tenets is that the behaviour of teachers is affected by perceptions of meaning in what one experiences, involving beliefs, values, and attitudes (Combs et al., 1974). Accordingly, dispositions embrace (Wasicsko, 2007) and reflect core beliefs, values,

and attitudes, which have an impact on how teachers view their work and engage in their practice (Mahalingappa et al., 2021). While these are personal perceptions, they are shaped by specific situations and contexts, as well as by individuals' interpretations of them (Combs et al., 1974). Accordingly, several distinct areas have been identified, including perceptions of the self, others—such as students and colleagues—and the purposes of teaching (Combs et al., 1974; Wasicsko, 2007). These areas in turn encompass broader perceptions that form a general frame of reference, such as having a service orientation and adopting a long-term perspective on events (Combs et al., 1974; Wasicsko, 2007), which are particularly relevant to this study. Given the importance of situations, contexts, and perceptions, this approach aligns with a more situated and contextual understanding of dispositions (Diez & Murrell, 2010; Strom et al., 2019), a perspective that is especially pertinent to this study.

These personal yet contextualised 'dispositions-as-perceptions' can be influenced by generational dispositions, as defined above. A constructionist approach to generations (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Salvi et al., 2022) lends support to this claim. According to Lyons and Schweitzer (2017), 'generation' is a frame to make sense of young and old people within a certain time context. While this frame is subjectively constructed, the construction emerges through the interaction of individuals and groups within their context. In this process, shared subjective experiences are likely to contribute to forming relatively common beliefs, values, and attitudes and even a sense of identity. As teacher dispositions are deemed to be influenced by generational dispositions within this constructionist approach, teacher dispositions can be understood as evolving collective phenomena influenced by multiple and interconnected circumstances (Gu, 2023; Strom et al., 2019) which may become apparent in each teacher in more specific situations. In this way, each teacher's dispositions are constructed 'in relation to and together with' (Strom et al., 2019, p. 21) generational dispositions influenced by shared experiences of shared circumstances that change over time.

In line with the above perspectives, the perceptions constituting teacher dispositions therefore have a personal dimension that may be intertwined with a collective dimension: teachers' perceptions may be linked to how they identify with generational groups, given the perceptions shared with other generation members (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). These perceptions not only contribute to the personal identification of each teacher but also enable them to identify with others. Although shared perceptions may exist regardless of links to a generation, this study focuses on exploring whether generational linkages are relevant to these perceptions.

The study

This exploratory study is part of a broader research project on teachers' intergenerational professional development and learning (Portela et al., 2022). It examines generational diversity among teachers, by characterising generational groups in terms of core professional dispositions as seen by young beginner teachers, mature veteran teachers and older retired teachers (hereafter, YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs, respectively). Both generational groups and their core

professional dispositions were identified by the participants themselves. The categorisation of the participants into YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs was based on chronological age and teaching experience in terms of years. The rationale behind it was to accentuate the felt degree of similarity with respect to others regarding age-related aspects, as will be discussed in Sect. "Participants, sampling, and recruitment" below. It is worth adding that the generational groups identified by the participants should not be confused with the categories of participants used in the study, although these categories might also be associated with generational groups, as will be discussed in Sect. "Participants, sampling, and recruitment" below.

The research questions are as follows:

(1) What differences and similarities can be found among YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs regarding their identification of generational groups and most important dispositions?
(2) What differences and similarities did YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs find in those professional dispositions among the different generational groups identified by them?
(3) According to the participating teachers, what shapes these differences and similarities in professional dispositions?

This study has an inductive orientation, which has been characterised as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data about phenomena of interest to draw conclusions and build theory from these data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This approach is considered appropriate for research that uses complex constructs based on limited theory (Eisenhardt et al., 2016), as is often the case with research adopting a generational perspective (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; Parry & Urwin, 2021). Our study aimed to capture the participants' views on generational groups regarding dispositions; similarities and differences among these groups; and conditions shaping these similarities and differences. It did not use predetermined generational categories that lack theoretical grounding. It aimed to capture similarities and differences among YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs and did not a priori assume that all these groupings corresponded to generational groups. Furthermore, the adoption of a more inductive approach to examining these issues made it less important to strictly identify specific factors leading to effects (e.g., the APC effects), and supported the exploration of a more comprehensive view of a generation comprising a variety of aspects, including ageing, progression over career stages, and shared experiences of certain circumstances at a similar stage, together with their interactions (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Parry & Urwin, 2021).

Methods

Design

The study adopted a constructivist-interpretivist approach, as it sought to make sense of the meaning and value that teachers attached to their experiences as they interacted with their context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach has been widely recognised as one of the most closely aligned with the inductive orientation that informs the study (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In addition, a design consistent with what has been identified as a basic qualitative study was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).[1] Based on the criteria proposed by Flick (2018), this was a comparative, cross-sectional study focused on single point-in-time comparisons. It also used a combination of methods (i.e., focus groups and interviews) to collect information about different aspects of the phenomena of study and acquire a greater depth of understanding (Maxwell, 2013).

Context

This study was conducted in Spain. To work as a teacher in Spain, a university-based initial teacher education program must be completed. Currently, this requires at least an undergraduate degree for pre-primary and primary teachers and a master's degree for secondary teachers. These programs have shifted from a rather traditional and ideological model to a more academic and technical model (Sancho-Gil et al., 2017). They aim to develop a set of competencies. Their core elements are knowledge and skills, but they also include some dispositions, expressed mainly in terms of values and attitudes (López-Gómez et al., 2020). On the other hand, continuing professional development is provided by education authorities and schools, often in cooperation with partner institutions. This provision has changed over time from a progressive model linked to teacher movements, to a more transmissive, technique-based model (Sales et al., 2011). Dispositional development has not been a deliberate core component of this provision, although some relevant activities have been offered, such as courses related to ensure the emotional wellbeing of teachers.

Several reforms have been launched in Spain to raise the quality of education (López-Gómez et al., 2020). The dispositional development of teachers has not been at the centre of any of them. Despite this situation and the lack of formal preparation in this regard, teacher dispositions may have evolved over time due to changes in the context. Some evidence has suggested that the changes accompanying those reforms on teachers' orientation to their work have become an important part of the circumstances in which they engage in that work (Müller et al., 2011). Some of these changes are outlined below, including some shared with other countries and others more specific to the education system in Spain (Flores, 2019; Müller et al., 2011).

[1] For further details on methods (including research quality, rigour, and ethics), see Portela et al. (2022); also partially reported elsewhere (Azorín et al., 2022; García Hernández, 2022; Marrero-Galván, 2023; Negrín-Medina et al., 2022; Torres Soto et al., 2022; Vallejo et al., 2024).

While teacher education remains in high demand mainly among younger people, teachers have been affected by high rates of unemployment, aggravated by the recent economic crises. Teachers' working conditions have also become increasingly precarious (e.g., short-term contracts). In order to comply with the applicable regulations, they have to face a heavier workload and a significant share of administration work. Moreover, teachers have been increasingly regarded as qualified professionals who are expected to meet a number of complex and varied demands, while at the same time they have seen a decline in their perceived social status and respect. Nevertheless, teacher turnover after entering the teaching profession and, in particular, attrition rates, are still low. Overall, there have been a set of gradual 'ruptures' (Flores, 2019, p. 47), that are likely to have been perceived and experienced differently by teachers of different generations.

Participants, sampling, and recruitment

The participants were a sample of YVTs, MVTs, and ORTs (n = 147) from both public schools and publicly-funded but privately-owned schools located in different Spanish regions, as the majority of teachers work in these schools. The selection criteria are shown in Table 1. Both age and years of teaching experience were used to categorise the participants into age-related groups (Müller et al., 2011). The rationale for this was that age increased consistently with length of teaching experience in Spain, as teachers tend to enter the teaching profession as early as possible after completing their degree and there is a low rate of teacher turnover and attrition (see Sect. "Context"). The division between YVTs, MVTs, and ORTs served to accentuate the felt degree of proximity or distance with respect to others regarding age-related aspects, which influences how generational diversity is understood and experienced (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011). This proximity or distance might be partially influenced by proximity or distance to shared broader significant circumstances and experiences at similar stages (Parry & Urwin, 2011). We sought, above all, to emphasise the distance between YVTs, on the one hand, and MVTs and ORTs, on the other, and the proximity within each of these groups. The decision to include retired teachers was also based on the evidence of continuity of relevant aspects of professional life beyond retirement (Shlomo & Oplatka, 2023). The additional differentiation between MVTs and ORTs was intended to ensure that differences could also be identified between both groups, since, although their members were closer in age and teaching experience, their professional situation had significantly changed due to retirement, which may also ultimately foster intergenerational professional collaboration. Accordingly, no teacher between the ages of 30 to 50 years old participate in the study. This sampling was intended to generate opportunities for comparison (Eisenhardt et al., 2016).

The participants were invited to participate by email. They were mainly recruited through a national union and several associations of retired teachers. A small number were recruited through the researchers' personal and social media networks. The main characteristics of the selected participants are shown in Table 2. These data were collected through an electronic questionnaire, and the responses obtained were

Table 1 Selection criteria

	Young beginner teachers (YBTs)	Mature veteran teachers (MVTs)	Older retired teachers (ORTs)
Age and Teaching Experience (Years)	Teachers aged 30 or younger, with no more than six school years' work experience in schools	Teachers aged 50 or above with at least 10 years' work experience in schools	Experienced retired teachers aged 60 or above (either voluntary or forced retirement)
Schooling levels	Early childhood education (2nd level) [ages 3–5] Primary education [ages 6–11] Secondary education (including basic and intermediate vocational education and training) [ages 12–18]		
Type of School	Public and publicly-funded private schools		

Table 2 Participant characteristics

	Young beginner teachers (YBTs) (n = 51)		Mature veteran teachers (MVTs) (n = 50)		Older retired teachers (ORTs) (n = 46)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age[a]	28	1.9	56.6	2.9	66.9	4.6
Teaching experience[b]	2.8	2	27.6	6.5	35.7	6.2

	YBTs		MVTs		ORTs		Full sample	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender								
Female	37	72.5	38	76	23	50	98	66.7
Male	14	27.5	12	24	23	50	49	33.3
School stage								
Elementary[c]	27	52.9	24	48	23	50	74	50.3
Secondary	24	47.1	26	52	23	50	73	49.7
Type of School[d]								
Public	44	86.3	48	96	46	100	138	93.9
Private[e]	7	13.7	2	4	0	0	9	6.1

[a]Age (in years) as of 31 December 2021

[b]Years' experience when participants answered the initial electronic questionnaire

[c]This category includes early childhood education (2nd level) and primary education

[d]The information refers to the school in which the teachers were working or the last one in which they worked

[e]Publicly-funded but privately-owned schools

checked during the interviews. The selection of participants was carried out through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). A combined sampling strategy was used, including homogeneous sampling (i.e., through homogeneous subgroups, namely, YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs), maximum variation sampling (i.e., through variation among these subgroups), and matched comparison sampling (i.e., by matching the subgroups that differed on the dimensions of interest) (Patton, 2015).

Data collection

Focus groups (n = 24, with 5 or 6 participants each) were used for an initial exploration of complex phenomena of interest, by drawing on a range of participant views and experiences (Hennink, 2014). They adopted the format of an exchange and discussion between participants (Hennink, 2014). However, it is important to note that while this method effectively served its exploratory purpose by generating data through interactions and conversations, the exchanges between participants were somewhat limited. This was largely because most participants in each session—each of relatively short duration—either did not know one another or were

only superficially acquainted, as some participants themselves acknowledged. In addition, the use of online focus groups has been associated with challenges stemming from participants' decreased willingness to share their views (Samardzic et al., 2023). The focus groups were conducted via videoconference according to a tested guide that included a small set of core questions, accompanied by a range of potential probes and follow-up questions (Patton, 2015). These core questions were the following: (1) What are your views on the teaching profession in general? (2) What are your views on your career? (3) What generations or generational groups can you identify among teachers, and what are their characteristics? (4) How do the members of each generational group view the members of the other groups? In line with the conceptualisation of dispositions, the participants were asked to give their views and reminded to focus on those aspects that they believed would lead them and other teachers to act in the way they tended to do. The focus group sessions lasted between 61 and 164 min, with an average length of 93 min. They took place from April to December 2021.

Individual in-depth interviews (n = 60) carried out as personal conversations were next conducted to examine the aspects of interest, including those that emerged in the focus groups, in a more comprehensive, detailed, and reflective manner (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Patton, 2015). The use of interviews together with focus groups also served to gather corroborating evidence and improve research quality and rigour (Portela et al., 2022). The interviewees included teachers who had participated in the focus groups and three additional teachers who had been unable to take part in them. The tested interview guide contained the following core questions: (1) What is your current view of teaching as a profession? Why? (2) What were your former views? Why? (3) With whom do you share and/or have you shared your view of the teaching profession? Why? These questions were also accompanied with potential probes and follow-up questions. The participants received similar reminders to those in the focus groups. The interview sessions conducted via videoconference ranged from 28 to 136 min, with an average length of 66 min. They also took place from April to December 2021.

The focus groups and interviews were segmented by age, teaching experience, and schooling level taught to ensure that homogeneity and heterogeneity of participants would be balanced, and to collect both similar and different points of view (Hennink, 2014). Figure 1 shows how they were segmented.

Data analysis

After obtaining the participants' consent, the focus groups and interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. A reflective thematic analysis was employed for data analysis which drew on the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach to qualitative data analysis was consistent with our research questions and the inductive and interpretivist approach to the study, as it offered a theoretically flexible set of tools for the identification and analysis of patterns and themes in the dataset, while enabling the researchers to critically reflect on their assumptions, decisions, and actions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis

FOCUS GROUPS (n = 24)			Age and Teaching Experience			
			Homogeneous			Heterogeneous
			YBTs[a]	MVTs[b]	ORTs[c]	YBTs + MVTs + ORTs
Schooling Level	Homogeneous	Elementary[d] / Secondary	n=6			n = 6
	Heterogeneous Elementary + Secondary		n = 6			n = 6

INTERVIEWS (n = 60)		Age and Teaching Experience		
		YBTs	MVTs	ORTs
Schooling Level	Elementary	n = 10	n = 10	n = 10
	Secondary	n = 10	n = 10	n = 10

[a] Young beginner teachers.
[b] Mature veteran teachers.
[c] Older retired teachers.
[d] This category includes early childhood education (2nd level) and primary education.

Fig. 1 Segmentation of focus groups and interviews

supported by ATLAS.ti 22 software consisted of the following overlapping and recursive phases applied first to the focus group data and then to the interview data:

Phase 1. The process began with data familiarisation, mainly by performing an interrogative reading of the transcripts and taking notes on potential aspects to be encoded.

Phase 2. An evolving set of codes was applied to the data by linking them to text segments relevant for answering the research questions. A more data-driven analysis using descriptive codes and selecting pertinent quotes was gradually followed by a more theory-driven analysis. The initial codes were reorganised into more theoretical ones, including codes related to areas of perception (Combs et al., 1974; Wasicsko, 2007). In addition, both recurrence and importance of the potential of codes and related data for advancing understanding were used as criteria for code selection. Although coding started independently, it was mainly collaborative, based on frequent conversations and planned discussions.

Phase 3. Themes were constructed. The codes and their corresponding data were examined to identify significant shared features to cluster them around central

organising concepts, which were associated with other concepts to be considered as sub-themes.

Phase 4. Potential themes were reviewed against the data to determine their appropriateness and then refined. In this phase, a number of related themes were then merged into overarching themes which matched the core dispositions most highlighted by the participants. The latter were selected for the study.

Phase 5. The naming and definition of themes were developed throughout the analytical process. Tentative names and definitions emerged at an early stage and were refined iteratively until the final ones were determined.

Phase 6. The report writing also started early as a means to support the analysis. Memos and related discussions were helpful in this process. Final materials were produced that related the findings to the literature and used some frequencies and illustrative quotes.

Findings

The participants identified two interrelated dispositions, teacher vocation and teacher engagement, as the core dispositions. Their statements referred to either teachers in general, groups of teachers, or themselves, although these perceptions often overlapped and also combined views on purposes and tasks. These areas of perception referred to in Sect. "Theoretical framework" (Combs, 1974; Wasicsko, 2007) were thus found to be intertwined in the data. Both core dispositions were more aligned with what could be characterised as perceptions shaping an overarching frame of reference. They can be understood as a perceptual framework for finding meaning in teaching. Accordingly, each of them holistically combined these areas of perception. Their salience was supported by the data, as the participants repeatedly recognised these dispositions in this manner (Buetow, 2010). Two overarching themes were thus selected, which will be described in the following sections. In addition to presenting both dispositions, these sections present generational similarities and differences and the conditions that most shaped them. These correspond to the themes and sub-themes identified.

The names used for identifying generational groups were 'younger' teachers and 'older' teachers. These generational groups were identified by the participating teachers and may be understood as holistic frames influenced by shared beliefs, values, and attitudes to make sense of age-related differences and similarities within a certain time frame. Few differences were found between veteran and retired teachers. These differences were also irrelevant and inconsistent and, hence, are not reported. The participants rarely used conventional generational labels, such as Boomers, Generation Xers, or Millennials. No noticeable differences were found in terms of gender, schooling level taught, or type of school.

Teacher vocation

All the focus groups addressed vocation as an important part of the participants' views of the teaching profession. Most of them mentioned this aspect in their

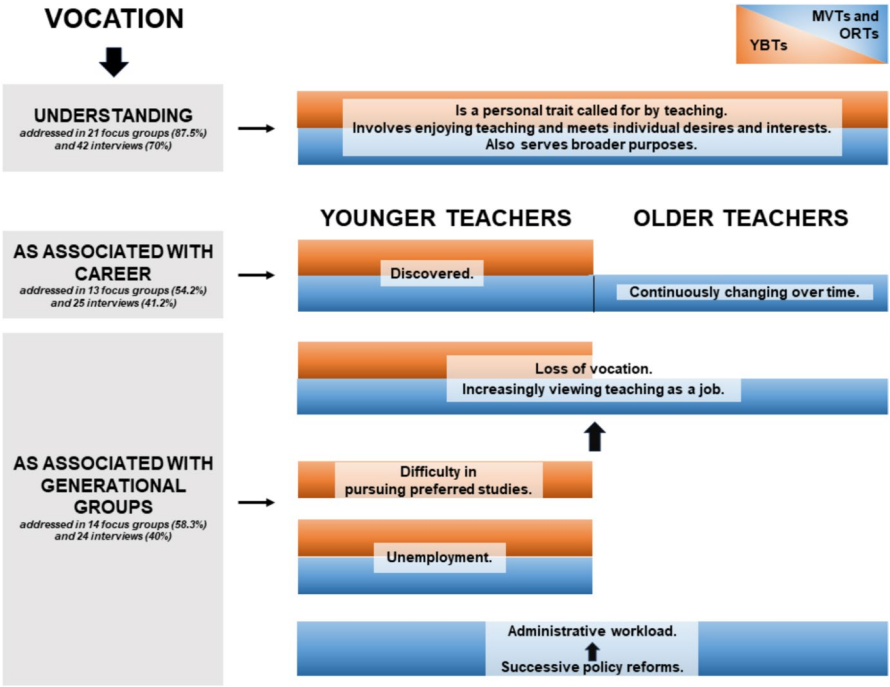

Fig. 2 Teacher vocation: themes and sub-themes

interviews and only one YBT and one MVT did not. The main themes and sub-themes in the findings are summarised in Fig. 2.

Vocation as viewed by teachers

There was considerable consensus on the characteristics that were associated with vocation. While participants tended to consider vocation to be a personal trait, they also believed it to be necessary for and called for by the valuable work that they were engaged in. As stated by one participant, 'It is the person… who has a [sense of] vocation' (YBT.sec. DCS-FG).[2] Another participant emphasised: 'Teaching requires vocation' (YBT.pri.AFR-FG). In general, vocation was characterised as enjoying, being excited about, and looking forward to teaching. One participant combined these traits in a short statement: 'It is important to have a vocation and to enjoy what you are doing, to bring more enthusiasm and excitement into your work' (YBT.pri.

[2] A code is used to identify quotations: those from YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs are identified using the same acronyms; those from early childhood educators (teachers), primary teachers, secondary teachers, and vocational education and training teachers are identified using, respectively, 'ece', 'pri', 'sec', and 'vet'; the following acronym identifies each participant; quotations from focus groups and interviews are identified using, respectively, 'FG' and 'I'.

ERC-FG). However, vocation was not only presented as an inclination to do what each teacher personally likes and wants to do. It was also deemed to be an inclination to serve purposes beyond, but consistent with, individual desires or interests. A frequently mentioned purpose was to provide a 'service' or to 'help'. In order for the participants to fulfill their inclination to enjoy teaching, it was important that their work should be of service to or help others, mainly their students, but also a school or society as a whole. Participants also reported that they sought to find coherence between personal satisfaction and service to others.

Vocation was regarded as an important trait for teachers: 'A teacher must have a vocation to teach' (MVT.ece.AIL-FG). However, YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs identified differences in terms of the degree of vocation among teachers. In line with considering vocation as a personal characteristic, these differences were sometimes attributed to the individual; namely, some were strongly vocational teachers, while others had a weaker sense of vocation or even no vocation to teach at all. Some participants noted that the differences were unrelated to either age or teaching experience. However, distinctions were often made according to career stage, often combined with age, and experiences and circumstances shared with other teachers of similar age and teaching experience. These distinctions are presented in the following two sections.

Vocation viewed as being associated with one's career

A number of participants reported that there are differences in vocation levels at different stages of a teacher's career. Some YBTs stated that they had found their vocation before starting their initial teacher training, often due to the influence of significant people, either family members who had been teachers or specific teachers they had in the past); or even before: 'I always played at being a teacher' (YBT.ece.YRM-I). Other YBTs reported that they had found their vocation after they started to teach, or that they had identified it over time: 'It is important to discover it [one's vocation] along the way' (YBT.sec.DPB-FG). 'Find' and 'discover' were the terms most used to situate the vocation in their life course or professional path. These were also employed by a few MVTs and ORTs to refer to their early teaching days.

However, MVTs and ORTs highlighted the dynamic nature of the teaching vocation. Some MVTs claimed that they still felt that teaching was their vocation, or that it had grown even stronger. However, others recognised that their sense of vocation had diminished: 'I feel that I've lost my [sense of] vocation a little bit over the years' (MVT.sec.MDCE-FG). Some ORTs also felt that their sense of vocation had remained, while others reported that it had faltered. Nevertheless, they highlighted that a sense of vocation 'develops over time' (ORT.sec.MEBP-FG) and can even be 'cultivated' (ORT.vet.EGS-FG) and 'built' (ORT.pri.FAGL-I).

Vocation viewed as being associated with circumstances and experiences

Some differences related to how participants of certain ages who had been in teaching for a specific number of years had experienced circumstances that they identified as being significant for their work, rather than being linked to their career stages per

se. It was quite common for participants to differentiate between a job or profession, on the one hand, and a vocation, on the other. When the participants referred to teaching as being merely a job or a profession, they meant teaching devoid of vocation, which was identified with working merely in exchange for a salary. A YBT and an ORT described the differences as follows:

> Someone who has a vocation doesn't mind giving more of themselves in exchange for nothing... A person who doesn't have a sense of vocation will say: 'Look, that's not my job'.... Imagine that there is an additional meeting to be held for unofficial reasons and those hours are not paid, or that a student needs you to stay late. Some people would do this and some would not, and both are respectable, but it really shows... (YBT.vet.JDP-I)
> As I understand it, [vocation] is not strictly limiting yourself to [doing] what the law says … That is just a job that one does, not a vocation. … When my colleague brought his students in to help them, that is having a sense of vocation ... He wasn't saying, 'Hey, look, I'm going to be here from three to five to teach math to these kids. And, I'm not getting paid for this, who pays me for this?' No, no, no. He was chill about it, he enjoyed his work, his students… (ORT.vet.FBC-I)

Whereas there were participants in the three groups who considered that these differences could be found both between younger teachers and older teachers, YBTs, MVTs and ORTs differed with respect to the scope and the explanation they gave for such differences. The YBTs often believed that there was less of a sense of vocation among younger teachers, and some even recognised this in themselves. For instance, one of them stated: 'This is a job. I think that some are trying to get us to forget this. You don't work because it's your vocation; you work for money to live, to survive… The sense of vocation should remain in the background' (YBT.sec.JDP-I). The main reason given to explain the diminished sense of vocation among younger teachers was that, ultimately, they ended up teaching 'out of necessity', either because they were not able to pursue their otherwise preferred studies or because they had not been able to secure their preferred jobs or better working conditions. For instance, one of the YBTs highlighted that their colleagues worked as teachers—in principle temporarily—'just out of need because they were unemployed, needed a wage, and were called to work' (YBT.vet.JMY-FG). Some YBTs noted that the persistent or increasing unemployment levels and overall deterioration of working conditions would also deter younger teachers from leaving their jobs. The YBTs rarely spoke about the vocation of older teachers.

A number of these MVTs and ORTs highlighted the loss of vocation both among younger teachers and among older teachers. Some ORTs highlighted that 'there was a stronger sense of vocation before than there is now'. When referring to younger teachers, both MVTs and ORTs attributed a loss of vocation to circumstances similar to those reported by YBTs; that is, having started teaching out of convenience or necessity due to higher rates of youth unemployment. For instance, an ORT considered that many current younger professionals were only engaged in teaching 'circumstantially', because unemployment and lack of opportunities of better working conditions had led them to teaching (ORT.vet.FBC-I). This stood in contrast with

other teachers whose vocation brought them into and kept them in teaching (ORT.vet.FBC-I). When referring to older teachers, both groups attributed it to broader social circumstances. However, MVTs most often attributed it to an occupational context increasingly experienced as adverse to the fulfillment of their vocation. This was mainly linked to an increase in compulsory tasks allegedly relevant to teaching but deemed to be administrative, often referred to as paperwork. These tasks included lesson planning, complex assessments, writing reports and proposals, and contributing to the drafting of school plans and regulations. They were often perceived as requiring adherence to numerous external rules stemming from evolving educational policies and reforms, which were frequently viewed as significant obstacles to teaching. Interestingly, while most YBTs did not comment on this situation, a small number mentioned that they had grown accustomed to handling substantial amounts of paperwork during their university studies. In the words of one teacher, 'there was nothing to compare it with' (YBT.pri.MCMN-FG). In contrast, the ORTs thought that broader social changes were particularly important. Some of them pointed out that the conditions that favoured a vocational approach to teaching, such as adherence to educational ideals (e.g., participation and democracy), and even historically-based ideologies or periods that had affected teachers (e.g., Spain's transition to democracy), no longer existed.

Teacher engagement

The second core disposition identified by the participants was engagement. This was mentioned in all the focus groups and interviews. It was common to think that the teaching profession involves teacher engagement, especially if combined with a sense of vocation. According to many participants that included YBTs who had reservations about teaching-as-vocation, a sense of vocation demands a high degree of engagement, although the former contributes to instilling the motivation needed to sustain the latter. Figure 3 summarises the main themes and sub-themes in the findings.

Engagement as viewed by teachers

As in the case of vocation, a number of similarities were identified in the participants' characterisation of engagement. This notion included aspects such as devoting time, as well as energy and effort (e.g., 'All this requires a lot of energy and a lot of dedication' [ORT.pri.AEG-I]); conferring meaning on the teaching role (e.g., 'I always try to make sure that my students understand all the aspects of my role' [YBT.sec.PGP-I]); persistence (e.g., 'Never give up' [YBT.ece.YRM-I]); and concentration (e.g., 'I got home at eleven-thirty at night and I was still thinking about it' [YBT.sec.SGC-FG]). It additionally encompassed the whole person as a multifaceted individual, including intellectual (e.g., 'You're always thinking' [MVT.pri.RCB-FG]); emotional (e.g., '[Teaching] involves a huge emotional burden' [YBT.pri.DSL-FG]); behavioural (e.g., 'If a child peed or pooped themselves, there was

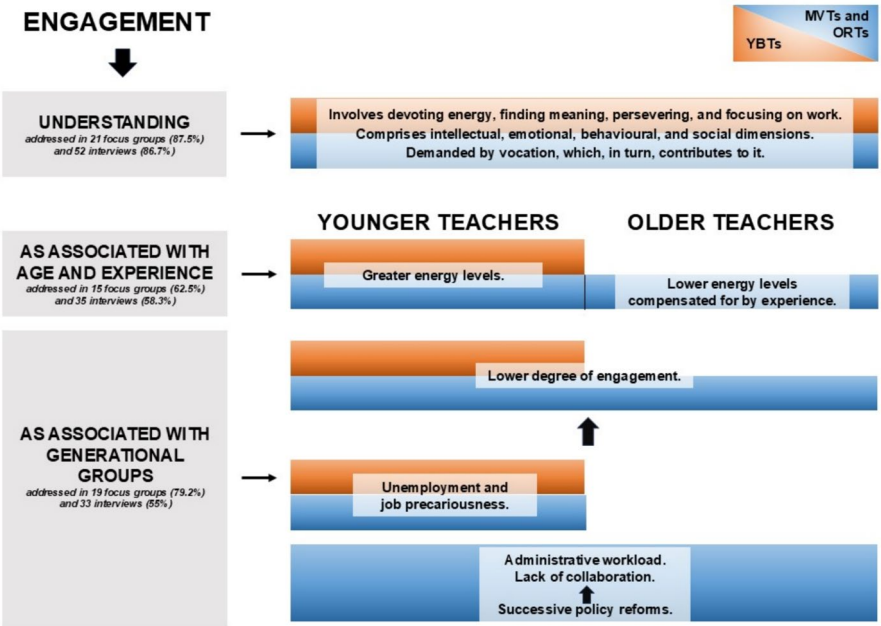

Fig. 3 Teacher engagement: themes and sub-themes

no way we were not going to change them' [MVT.pri.PSJ-I]); and social dimensions (e.g., 'You work in strongly cooperative ways' [YBT.sec.PGP-I]).

Engagement viewed as being associated with age and teaching experience

The participants sometimes considered engagement to be a personal characteristic, with differences being attributed to individuals. For example, they often stated that some teachers were more involved than others, which may also vary from teacher to teacher. However, they also again identified differences between younger and older teachers. Part of these differences were associated with age and teaching experience.

Youth was often linked to having greater energy and vitality. No other aspects were mentioned in connection with the engagement of younger teachers. For example, one YBT stated, 'I would characterise my generation as being the most energetic' (YBT.pri.DJM-I). One MVT indicated that 'young people come with new blood, they come strong' (MVT.sec.PSB-I). In contrast, being older was associated with having lower energy levels: 'It is noticeable that they are more tired' (YBT.pri.BFS-FG); 'I don't have as much energy as when I started' (MVT.pri.MJFB-FG).

However, it is worth noting that some participants differentiated between engagement and vocation when considering that the level of engagement might dissipate as a consequence of ageing, while a sense of vocation remained: 'I still think that it [my profession] is my vocation … It is true that I feel less energetic, more tired… I see that lack of energy or increasing fatigue are compensated for with my greater professional experience' (MVT.vet.MENC-I). This also shows that some MVTs and

ORTs thought that having greater and richer teaching experience played a compensatory role, as it served to maintain the necessary levels of engagement demanded by their sense of vocation when the ageing process tended to bring lower engagement levels.

Engagement viewed as being associated with circumstances and experiences

Differences between younger and older teachers identified by the participants also included having common experiences under similar significant circumstances shared with colleagues of a certain age range and similar teaching experience. Some participants differentiated between teachers with a high level of engagement and those who were merely doing a job, which is a difference similar to that identified in connection with vocation).

The YBTs who differentiated between more and less engaged teachers again mentioned those of similar ages and experience as their own. They again attributed the lack of engagement to some circumstances which these teachers had experienced that compelled them to join the teaching profession, such as unemployment, job insecurity, lack of other qualified employment.

MVTs and ORTs often held that there have always been different levels of engagement among teachers. However, they tended to think that teachers' engagement has decreased over time. Some ORTs perceived the change between themselves and their children, as illustrated by the following quote:

> I have two children who are teachers. I think they are very good professionals, but I see that what I had with my students and my school was different. … I sometimes got home at 10:00 at night and was still with students, because I liked it; and we did workshops, we did things that had nothing to do with schedule ... [Today] they operate in a completely different way, and the idea is to finish as soon as possible. (ORT.pri.PDCS-FG)

These changes in engagement were generally attributed to a wider range of shared circumstances, including fewer resources, increasing diversity levels, and behavioural problems among students. When referring to the engagement of younger teachers, MVTs and ORTs made similar comments to those by YBTs. However, MVTs and ORTs stressed two circumstances which affected teachers, especially those with age and teaching experience similar to them. One circumstance was the increasing administration workload, which included many compulsory tasks, often associated with teaching. One ORT summarised it as follows: 'The Education Authorities have more and more power, and we have more and more paperwork' (ORT.sec.AFC-FG). This administrative work required a lot of time and effort, in an amount comparable to that demanded by vocation-driven involvement. However, the main problem was that the time spent on administrative work was seen as being meaningless, which made it incompatible with a teacher's sense of vocation. One MVT explained it as follows:

> What you hear when you are with your friends … is: I'm tired of doing useless paperwork. Standards-based lesson plans have been a beastly workload in the

> school and aren't helping anyone.... Does it make any sense to do all that? It's just more work for the sake of it. (MVT.ece.MDMP-I)

Another circumstance mentioned to account for these changes was the lack of collaboration and contexts to foster it. For a number of these MVTs and ORTs, the engagement required to teach and develop one's sense of vocation went beyond individual engagement and demanded that teachers engage as a group. Some YBTs also shared this view. Some ORTs again used their past experiences to illustrate the importance of a broader favourable shared context, aligned with purpose:

> …the social situation… that Spain was going through, with changes … a culture concerned with educating people... The group of people I worked with, we had a way of working together, we were willing to spend the time... without counting the hours. (ORT.pri.ANM-FG)

In the absence of this type of close relationship around specific purposes, participants reported that individual engagement tends to fade away. One MVT explained it succinctly: 'If relationships are not good, you don't get involved, you don't want to work on projects' (MVT.ece.MDMP-FG). In the opinion of some MVTs and ORTs, shared engagement has at least two major obstacles that have built up over time: the increased administration workload and considering teaching merely as a job.

Summary

To sum up, YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs highlighted vocation and engagement as two closely interrelated core dispositions that served to give meaning to their work. They shared a similar understanding of them, which was not affected by their differentiation between younger and older teachers. These were the generational groups identified by the participating teachers to make sense of age-related aspects, including those understood in a narrow sense. However, the findings also indicated that YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs attributed similarities and differences in these dispositions to those generational groups. In their view, age, teaching experience, and career stage made a difference to the sense of vocation and engagement. Specifically, vocation was influenced by career stage, although no differences were made between stages; rather, engagement was influenced by age and teaching experience. At the outset of their career, teachers are deemed to be discovering, or to have discovered, their vocation, while toward the end of their career they are considered to be involved in a process of change regarding vocation. Regarding engagement, the participating teachers contended that younger teachers have more energy, while older teachers have less, although their experience compensates for this and sustains their sense of vocation. Furthermore, YBTs, and mainly MVTs and ORTs shared the idea that vocation and engagement are declining among teachers in general or, at least, among younger ones, mainly according to the YBTs. In the participants' views, this is affected by circumstances being experienced differently by each generational group. According to YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs, these circumstances included unemployment and job precariousness in terms of the decline in vocation and engagement among

younger teachers; these were considered as the main reasons for them to join and remain in the teaching profession, regardless of whether these teachers originally had a sense of vocation or not. These circumstances were not perceived to influence older teachers. In contrast, MVTs and ORTs highlighted the influence of circumstances involving changes in occupational conditions linked to broader policy and social changes (i.e., perceived compulsory administration workload and lack of professional collaboration or ideological changes). These were recognised as conflicting with a sustained sense of vocation and the engagement associated with it and considered to influence mainly older teachers.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to characterise generational groups of teachers in terms of the core professional dispositions, as both were identified by the participants. This characterisation has been made by identifying similarities and differences between these generational groups and examining their main determinants. The study also aimed to identify similarities and differences between YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs, since these groups might be also associated with different generational groups, as indicated in Sect. "Participants, sampling, and recruitment" above.

One of the findings of the study is that YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs recognised vocation and engagement as core dispositions. Interestingly, vocation has been defined as an inclination, as if in response to an inner and outer calling, to undertake a certain kind of work (Hansen, 1994; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Engagement has been often defined as a work-related motivational state characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Bakker et al., 2023; Klassen & Durksen, 2015). Its importance for the work of teachers has been identified in different countries (Klassen et al., 2012; Onyefulu et al., 2023). Both core dispositions can be deemed to be combinations of beliefs, attitudes, and values that incline teachers to act in a certain way (West et al., 2020). However, these dispositions have only partially been recognised in the existing literature on professional dispositions. It has been argued that vocation and engagement could individually be regarded as major relevant dispositions (Day et al., 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008), or that at least some aspects of them (e.g., service orientation and enthusiasm, respectively) may be associated with dispositions (Wasicsko, 2007; West et al., 2020). There is also some evidence supporting the importance of teacher vocation and engagement for teacher quality (Day, 2017; Perera et al., 2021).

YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs also identified dispositional similarities and, to a greater extent, differences that were associated with generational groups. These groups were in turn associated with being a 'younger' or an 'older' teacher. There is consistent evidence in the literature regarding this differentiation (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017; Lyons et al., 2019). The differentiation was based on 'a felt degree of similarity or distance with respect to others loosely based on something to do with age' (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011, p. 6). A sense of age, together with its social significance, was the source of identification (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2017). Accordingly, a generation is usually conceived as 'an undifferentiated whole', without any distinctions being

made between chronological age, other meanings of age, life stage, career stage, cohort, or historical period (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011, p. 6). Our findings regarding these similarities and differences between younger and older teachers are specifically discussed in the following sections.

Teacher vocation

In line with previous studies (Day et al., 2006; Stone-Johnson, 2016), our findings suggest that the participants considered vocation to be at least potentially important for teachers in general. Moreover, they shared a similar understanding of this disposition that combined two dimensions that reflected different approaches: vocation as personal fulfillment conducive to satisfaction (e.g., being dedicated to what one likes and wants to do); and vocation as a response to a duty individually assumed (e.g., helping others in need) (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

The results also showed that the participants identified differences between younger and older teachers when contextualising vocation in teacher career trajectories. YBTs tended to emphasise that vocation was 'found' or 'discovered' before entering initial teacher training or at a later stage. The literature has drawn attention to the importance of this discovery process, consisting of identifying a match between personal characteristics and the purposes to be served through them (Thompson & Christensen, 2018). However, MVTs and ORTs tended to emphasise that vocation is continuously developed, which has been considered one of its key characteristics (Hansen, 2021). Thus, these differences identified in our study suggest that ageing and professional advancement may contribute to a teacher having a more comprehensive perspective of vocation, as vocation is constantly evolving, and it usually takes considerable time and experience to appreciate what this involves (Hansen, 2021).

Additional differences between younger and older teachers regarding vocation were also associated with changes in circumstances which, depending on age and experience, may either have been experienced differently by some teacher groups, or experienced by some but not by others. The differentiation between teachers who conceive teaching as a vocation rather than as a job was used to stress the impact that changing circumstances may have on teachers. Other authors have identified similar dichotomies (Müller et al., 2011; Weiner, 2020). In general, the participants thought that some present circumstances make it difficult for teaching to be considered a vocation and identified an increasing lack of it among teachers. For many participants, the precarious Spanish labour market leads younger teachers to join the profession without being clear about whether they have a calling to do so or, at least, whether it is something that they will pursue. As reported by many MVTs and ORTs, older teachers' pursuit of their vocation conflicts with the increasing administrative workload that pervades teaching; in other words, the administrative aspects of the job are becoming integral, rather than peripheral, to teaching in Spain and elsewhere (García-Hernández et al., 2022; Spicksley, 2022). Consistent with other findings (Browes & Altinyelken, 2022; Stacey et al., 2022, 2023), these teachers were reported to experience an incongruity between administrative tasks and what they

believed teaching as a vocation to be. The scarcity of references to this situation by YBTs may be interpreted as meaning that they experienced it as normal before they became teachers (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Wilkins, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2021). These results suggest that a change in circumstances has taken place. This change was mainly flagged by retired teachers. Given their greater temporal perspective and memory (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006), these teachers felt that the circumstances that promoted vocational teaching no longer exist either in Spain or elsewhere, in contrast with what was noted by Müller et al. (2011). However, a vocational approach might be maintained as an ideal (Müller et al., 2011). Ultimately, teachers might see their sense of vocation weaken over time, although career advancement can contribute to its development as well. In line with what was indicated above, experiencing certain situations may strengthen some dispositions, but they may also weaken or even suppress others (Bair, 2017; Truscott & Stenhouse, 2022).

Teacher engagement

Together with vocation, engagement was identified as a core teacher disposition by the participants. There was agreement among the participants not only regarding the importance of engagement in teaching, but also their understanding of it. This understanding was connected with how it is conceptualised in the literature, as it was often characterised as the elevated and stable engagement generated by vocation-induced motivation (Kolodinsky et al., 2018). The aspects of engagement highlighted by the participants also corresponded to three components often identified in previous research, which affect different personal dimensions (i.e., cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social), including vigour (i.e., devoting time, energy and effort), dedication (i.e., work felt as significant and meaningful), and absorption (i.e., concentration on performing tasks) (Klassen & Durksen, 2015).

Nevertheless, the participants also differentiated between younger teachers and older teachers in terms of engagement. When associating engagement with age, there were participants of all ages who believed that younger teachers were more engaged than older teachers. In contrast, some participants felt that there were low levels of engagement among younger teachers and even teachers in general, as they associated engagement with changes that had occurred in the teaching profession over time. These results do not necessarily conflict with each other.

Those differences that participants associated with age are consistent with those identified in the literature on teachers' careers. An initial stage characterised by stronger engagement and later stages with lower engagement levels among many teachers has often been identified (Lowe et al., 2019; Stone-Johnson, 2016). However, our results suggest that these differences associated with age may not affect all the dimensions of engagement. The participants only focused on so-called vigour (Klassen & Durksen, 2015), as they emphasised that younger teachers have more energy and vitality than older teachers when performing their work. In addition, the results showed that teaching experience may have an impact in this regard. Experience may compensate for the limitations in engagement levels attributed to ageing. The literature has found this

compensation strategy intended to maintain engagement (i.e., the use of alternative means to maintain a level of functioning when current means are thwarted or unavailable) among the teaching workforce in the most advanced stage of their careers (Richardson & Watt, 2018).

These results are potentially congruent with considering that teachers' overall engagement levels may become lower over time as the circumstances around them change. YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs mainly attributed the lower levels of engagement found among younger teachers to the fact that they were impelled to join the teaching profession due to the precarious labour market and the lack of alternatives in Spain. MVTs and ORTs emphasised two major changes in the circumstances that affected teaching. These were an increase in the administrative workload involved, which interferes with teachers' sense of vocation, and the lack of opportunities and contexts for collaboration needed to engage effectively. Both changes in working conditions have been identified in previous studies (Murray, 2021; Stacey et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The YBTs, MVTs, and ORTs considered two closely related dispositions to be the most important, namely engagement and a sense of vocation. They shared similar views about them. They also differentiated between two generational groups: younger and older teachers. In making this differentiation, generations were understood as distinct amalgamations of age, career, and professional experience, and shared experiences of certain significant circumstances at similar stages (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011). Additionally, the participating teachers pointed to considerable similarities and differences in the dispositions highlighted by the generational groups of teachers that they identified. Overall, the participants tended to perceive that younger teachers considered teaching a job and have less of a sense of vocation and lower levels of engagement; while they also perceived that older teachers regard teaching as a calling, have a greater sense of vocation, and are more engaged. However, they shared the idea that sense of vocation and engagement are generally declining. The differences and the similarity found between younger and older teachers were attributed to age, career and professional experience, and circumstances shared with other teachers of similar age and experience over fairly similar time frames. Consequently, the results suggest that, if teacher generations are understood as the amalgamations of aspects discussed above, they are likely to contribute to shaping professional dispositions and, therefore, can help to understand how these develop. Interestingly, those findings were more frequently emphasised by MVTs and ORTs, who may have a broader time perspective and a richer memory. Nevertheless, some were also identified by YBTs. The findings thus support conceptualising teachers' dispositions as diverse, shifting, and co-constituted enactments stemming from their shared experiences and circumstances (Strom et al., 2019).

Limitations and future directions

Given the holistic view of a generational group adopted by the participants, the results and conclusion of this study should be treated with caution, because they do not reflect a separation between the influence of advancing age (i.e., age effects), the influence of events that occurred over a period of time (i.e., period effects), and generational influences in a narrow sense (i.e., cohort effects) (Salvi et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2020). The influence of career stages has not been assessed separately from the other influences either (Parry & Urwin, 2011). The cross-sectional design adopted accentuates this possible limitation (Costanza et al., 2012). Whereas the aforementioned influences are closely related to each other and deserve to be combined to further the understanding of generational phenomena (Lyons & Kuron, 2014), it may also be interesting to focus on each of them separately.

It cannot be excluded that some participants' assertions may correspond to age stereotypes, understood as beliefs that generalise characteristics to the members of a group identified by their age (Geeraerts et al., 2021). In future research, it may be of interest to consider the role of these stereotypes in the beliefs of teachers.

The sample of teachers who participated in the study is another reason to interpret the results cautiously. First, the sample did not include teachers in the midlife or midcareer stage to accentuate the identification of age-related differences. Therefore, it would be useful to collect data from these teachers so that, in addition to the value they have in themselves, they could be compared with those obtained from other teachers. Second, the data were collected from cases in which there was a close link between age and years of professional experience, since this continues to be the most frequent situation in Spain, as noted in Sect. "Participants, sampling, and recruitment". However, cases and contexts in which an increasing age does not run in parallel with an increasing career length also deserve special attention and could be addressed in future studies. Third, the context of the participants may significantly differ in other aspects from that of teachers in other countries and also from other time periods. Despite some of the results obtained being consistent with findings from studies conducted in different contexts at different time frames, it could be useful to continue to investigate the main professional dispositions found among teachers in other countries and periods, as well as their differences and similarities (Ehrich et al., 2020; Klassen & Kim, 2021).

Finally, a broader limitation of the study lies in the fact that there is some leeway to provide further details and nuances regarding the results. The study can serve as a useful starting point to expand the results obtained. However, more qualitative studies with a more specific research strategy conducted over a longer period could contribute to a more in-depth study with a broader scope if, for example, they were carried out in other countries (Morse, 2003). Similarly, quantitative studies informed by qualitative findings would be able to assess the extent to which these qualitative findings are found in other samples and generalisable to other populations (Hesse-Biber et al., 2015).

Practical implications

Two major implications for educational practice can be highlighted. Quality teaching requires not only good teachers, but also diverse teachers who engage in quality collaboration (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017). Quality collaboration is likely to need intergenerational relationships between teachers, characterised by interaction and cooperation between different generations to achieve common goals, but also by awareness of the similarities and differences between them (Villar, 2007). Studies such as this one can encourage teachers and other agents in and around the school (e.g., school leaders) to become more aware of and reflect on such similarities and differences and can therefore promote schools as intergenerational workplaces.

Additionally, studies such as this one can help schools to develop integrated cultures (Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004, p. 141), which are likely to favour intergenerational relationships between teachers. In veteran-oriented cultures and novice-oriented cultures, the views of certain groups of teachers predominate, thus distancing or separating teachers. In contrast, integrated cultures embrace different types of expertise to benefit from this diversity through professional exchange. Having an awareness of both expertise-based and other similarities and differences, including dispositional ones as highlighted in this study, may contribute to building more integrated cultures. In the specific case of professional dispositions, context matters, and these cultures can serve as context for supporting their development. As dispositions develop not only individually but also collectively in interaction with a context, they are likely to need to emerge from within a professional community and are perceived as belonging to it (Carroll, 2012; Fonseca-Chacana, 2019). Moreover, enculturation is more conducive to the acquisition of dispositions, through immersion in a culture that teachers themselves contribute to create (Ritchhart, 2015, 2023). Intergenerational workplaces with integrated cultures are thus likely to make significant contributions to teaching quality through recognising and promoting teacher diversity.

Opportunities for professional collaboration are among the most important aspects of teachers' working conditions that affect not only their quality and effectiveness but also their decision to remain in teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Integrated cultures may also, then, promote teacher retention, not only among younger early career teachers, but also among older, more veteran teachers. Developing dispositions such as vocation and engagement through integrated cultures may be a contributing factor for retention, since both dispositions have been associated with the intention to remain in the teaching profession (Mérida-Lopez et al., 2020; Onyefulu et al., 2023).

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Writing—review & editing. Abraham Bernárdez Gómez: Methodology; Investigation; Software; Writing—review & editing.

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Declarations

Ethical approval The authors have no financial or non-financial interests to disclose. All study participants provided informed consent. The study design was approved by the appropriate ethics review board, which is the Ethics Commission of the University of Murcia (Approval Identification Code: 2087/2018).

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