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Optimal Contact, Negative Stereotypes, and Teachers' Intercultural Self-Efficacy: A Mediation Model in Colombian In-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' intercultural self-efficacy remains central to fostering inclusive practices in culturally diverse classrooms. Despite its educational relevance, few studies have examined relational and cognitive mechanisms underlying this perceived competence, particularly in Latin American contexts. Drawing on intergroup contact theory, this study investigated whether negative stereotypes mediate the relationship between teachers' intercultural contact experiences and intercultural self-efficacy. A cross-sectional survey included 322 in-service teachers in Colombia who completed self-report measures of the frequency and quality of intergroup contact, negative intergroup stereotypes, and intercultural self-efficacy. Mediation analyses revealed that optimal contact was associated with higher intercultural self-efficacy and lower endorsement of negative stereotypes. Negative stereotypes, in turn, were negatively associated with intercultural self-efficacy. The indirect effect of optimal contact on intercultural self-efficacy through negative stereotypes was significant, while the direct effect remained significant, supporting a partial mediation model. These findings highlight the relevance of addressing both intergroup contact experiences and stereotype-related beliefs in teacher education and professional development aimed at supporting intercultural competence.

1 | Introduction

Cultural diversity has become a key characteristic of contemporary education systems, given the increasing immigration, ethnic plurality, linguistic diversity, and persistent social inequalities. These transformations require teachers not only to recognize diversity, but also to develop the confidence, pedagogical resources, and relational skills needed to teach and interact effectively in culturally diverse classrooms. In this context, teachers' perception of their own capacity to respond to the challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity has become a central variable for inclusion (Peterson and Jensen 2025).

This ability has been conceptualized as intercultural self-efficacy, and its analysis is particularly relevant in countries like Colombia, where cultural, ethnic, territorial, and migratory diversity coexist, often characterized by unequal educational opportunities, differentiated expectations, and both explicit and subtle forms of exclusion affecting historically marginalized groups (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2026; Muñoz-Sánchez 2024; Santos-González 2022; Silva-Guadamud and Plaza-Rodríguez 2025).

Although Colombian educational policy formally recognizes cultural diversity and intercultural education (e.g., Political Constitution, General Education Law 115, ethno-education

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guidelines), empirical evidence remains limited regarding the social cognitive and relational factors associated with teachers' intercultural self-efficacy. Addressing this gap is especially relevant because teachers' everyday interactions with culturally diverse students and their beliefs about diversity may directly and indirectly influence classroom climate, pedagogical practices, and students' educational trajectories (Matarranz and Aguado Odina 2025).

An exhaustive review of the available literature identified no previous study that had directly tested the associations among optimal intergroup contact, negative intergroup stereotypes, and intercultural self-efficacy within a single mediation model among in-service teachers in Latin America. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether negative stereotypes statistically mediate the association between optimal intergroup contact and intercultural self-efficacy in a sample of Colombian in-service teachers.

1.1 | Teachers' Intercultural Self-Efficacy in Culturally Diverse Classrooms

Bandura (1997, 2000) defined self-efficacy as individuals' beliefs in their capacity to organize and execute the actions required to achieve particular outcomes. In education, teacher self-efficacy has been conceptualized as teachers' perceived ability to promote student learning, even under difficult or challenging conditions (Buzzai et al. 2022; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001). In inclusive educational contexts, this perception is particularly relevant, as teacher self-efficacy has been associated with more favorable attitudes toward inclusion and with lower levels of concern about its pedagogical demands (Savolainen et al. 2022).

In culturally diverse classrooms, this construct acquires a specific nuance, conceptualized as intercultural self-efficacy. Teachers' intercultural self-efficacy refers to teachers' perceived ability to teach, communicate, and manage pedagogical situations effectively in culturally, ethnically, or linguistically diverse contexts. It differs from general teacher self-efficacy in that it specifically concerns teachers' perceived competence in responding to cultural diversity through classroom interactions, curriculum adaptation, intercultural communication, and inclusive pedagogical practices. This dimension is especially relevant for intercultural classroom management, as it involves teachers' perceived ability to respond to cultural diversity in coexistence, communication, and everyday pedagogical practice (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2025; Makarova et al. 2023; Ulbricht et al. 2022; Said Hung et al. 2024).

Previous research has shown that intercultural self-efficacy is related to the use of intercultural practices, willingness to adapt teaching, and perceived ability to create inclusive learning environments (Peterson and Jensen 2025; Romijn et al. 2020; Schwarzenthal et al. 2022). It should not be understood as a fixed teacher attribute, but rather as a situated professional perception that may vary according to experience, school context, institutional diversity climate, training, and the quality of interactions with culturally diverse students. In this regard, Ulbricht et al. (2022) found that teachers' perceptions of the

school diversity climate were associated with intercultural self-efficacy, while Romijn et al. (2020) and Peterson and Jensen (2025) emphasized the relevance of experience with diverse students and intercultural classroom practices. Similarly, Pevec-Zimmer et al. (2024) showed that training based on the identity project can increase pre-service teachers' awareness and self-efficacy in interactions with ethnically and culturally diverse students.

This approach is particularly relevant to the present study because it situates intercultural self-efficacy as a professional perception shaped not only by training or institutional context (Fackler and Malmberg 2016), but also by teachers' relational experiences with culturally diverse students and teachers' belief systems. Therefore, understanding the factors associated with teachers' intercultural self-efficacy requires examining both the relational facet, such as the frequency and quality of contact, and the sociocognitive dimension, such as stereotypes.

1.2 | Optimal Intergroup Contact in Multicultural Educational Contexts

Intergroup contact constitutes one of the main psychosocial explanations for prejudice reduction. Since Allport (1954) classic formulation, contact theory has argued that interaction between members of different groups can improve intergroup relations, particularly when it occurs under favorable conditions such as equal status, cooperation, common goals, and institutional support. Further refinements of the theory posit the potential for building friendships (Pettigrew 1998). The accumulated evidence has widely confirmed the relevance of intergroup contact. Several meta-analyses showed that intergroup contact is consistently associated with lower levels of prejudice, while subsequent work indicated that these effects are explained, among other mechanisms, by reduced anxiety, increased empathy, and improved knowledge of the outgroup (Pereira da Costa et al. 2024; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008; Van Assche et al. 2023).

Educational settings provide a particularly relevant context for applying intergroup contact theory since daily interactions between teachers and students shape beliefs, expectations, and perceptions of competence. Theory and evidence show that frequent, high-quality contact can reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations in school and youth contexts (Bagci et al. 2022; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). Specifically, Tropp et al. (2022) suggest that interventions based on intergroup contact with young people need careful attention to the conditions under which contact takes place, the emotional responses it generates, and the broader context of inequality in which intergroup relations are embedded. Also, FitzGerald et al. (2019) and Johnson and Stephan (2000) support the importance of combining intergroup contact, explicit work on diversity, and counter-stereotypical information to reduce bias and improve intergroup attitudes. However, the mere exposure to diversity is insufficient, as contact can vary substantially in quality, emotional tone, and communicative intention. It has been observed that negative or superficial contact may reinforce perceived threat, increase negative stereotypes, and reduce willingness to engage in future interactions with members of

the same or other outgroups (Allidina and Cunningham 2021; Karataş et al. 2023; Prati et al. 2021). Recent evidence has also emphasized that positive, cooperative, and emotionally safe contact is more likely to produce favorable outcomes, whereas negative contact may have particularly strong effects on intergroup attitudes (Paolini et al. 2024; Schäfer et al. 2021). In this sense, optimal contact may be associated not only with lower negative stereotypes, but also with stronger intercultural self-efficacy. Positive experiences with culturally diverse people may function as mastery experiences, in the sense proposed by Bandura (1997, 2000), by allowing teachers to verify their ability to communicate, adapt their teaching, and build effective pedagogical relationships in multicultural contexts. Research on inclusive self-efficacy has similarly shown that mastery experiences and school environment predict teachers' self-efficacy beliefs toward inclusive teaching (Wilson et al. 2020).

Recent studies support this interpretation. Meleady et al. (2021) found a dynamic association between intergroup contact and intercultural competence, while Doyle et al. (2024) showed that previous contact with people experiencing economic hardship and with children from disadvantaged contexts reduced future teachers' aversion toward diverse schools. Doyle et al. (2025) further highlighted the relevance of interracial contact for teacher self-efficacy. Bardach et al. (2024) found that cultural diversity, climate and optimal contact conditions were robustly associated with intergroup, academic, and socioemotional outcomes. Likewise, McKeown et al. (2025) emphasized the role of frequent and high-quality interactions as a basis for school-based interventions grounded in contact theory.

1.3 | Negative Stereotypes and Teachers' Perceptions of Culturally Diverse Students

Although stereotypes can have both positive and negative content and both are important facets of impression formation and social behaviors (Fiske 2018), negative stereotypes are of particular interest for theory and applications given strong evidence that negative stereotypes exert a more substantial and more consistent influence on adverse intergroup outcomes than positive stereotypes do on beneficial ones (Paolini et al. 2024). Therefore, this study focuses on negative stereotypes as generalized, devaluing beliefs attributed to members of particular social groups.

Stereotypes operate as cognitive schemas that simplify social reality, but they may also distort perceptions of the "other" and contribute to prejudice and discrimination in educational contexts (Dovidio et al. 2010; Fiske 2018; Fiske et al. 2002; Nasie 2023; Zhukova et al. 2024). In schools, these beliefs may influence teachers' expectations, interpretations of student behavior, pedagogical decisions, and the quality of teacher-student interactions (Alessandro et al. 2023; Denessen et al. 2020).

Negative stereotypes may also shape teachers' perceptions of their own professional competence and, in turn, their intercultural self-efficacy. Specifically, research shows that when teachers interpret diversity through deficit-oriented frameworks, they may view culturally diverse classrooms as more

difficult, less predictable, or more demanding (Akca et al. 2018). In this sense, Chwastek et al. (2021) found that negative stereotypes toward refugee children were associated with lower levels of teacher self-efficacy and enthusiasm, whereas multicultural beliefs were positively related to both variables.

Evidence also suggests that stereotypes may shape teachers' academic expectations toward immigrant or minority students and may contribute to achievement gaps through self-fulfilling prophecy mechanisms, although such effects are not always observed in final performance outcomes (Lorenz 2021). In Latin American contexts, Ayala et al. (2024) found that teachers may rely on national or ethnic stereotypes, for example toward Haitian students in Chile, when assessing learning abilities. These findings suggest that stereotypes are not merely abstract beliefs, but may influence how teachers interpret students' behavior, potential, and educational needs. Similarly, Gutentag et al. (2018) showed that teachers' conceptualization of cultural diversity is relevant: perceiving immigrant students as a resource, rather than as a problem, was associated with higher levels of diversity-related self-efficacy. Other studies have also linked teachers' beliefs about diversity, prejudice toward ethnic minorities, and self-efficacy-related outcomes (Glock et al. 2019; Glock and Costa 2025).

In addition, stereotypes may interact with emotional processes, such as intergroup anxiety or fear of addressing culturally or racially sensitive issues. Rucinski (2022) found that higher implicit racial bias predicted lower intentions to engage students in conversations about race, while concern about appearing racist predicted both lower intentions and lower confidence in doing so. These processes may generate avoidance, professional insecurity, or a lower disposition to promote pedagogical interactions around diversity (Hölscher et al. 2024).

Taken together, this literature suggests that intercultural contact and negative stereotypes may be linked to intercultural self-efficacy through two complementary pathways. First, stereotypes may directly influence how teachers perceive and interpret intercultural classroom demands, undermining confidence in their ability to respond effectively to culturally diverse classrooms. Second, negative stereotypes may mediate a system in which the absence of optimal intergroup contact reinforces negative stereotypical beliefs, which, in turn, erode teachers' perceived competence in culturally diverse teaching settings.

2 | The Present Study: An Integrated Mediation Model in a New Context

Colombia combines longstanding ethnic and cultural diversity, including Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities whose histories have been shaped by structural racism and struggles for recognition, with substantial recent migration, particularly from Venezuela (Castillo Guzmán and Caicedo Ortiz 2025; Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela R4V 2025). Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have often sought cultural recognition, identity preservation, and intercultural integration, whereas recent migrant groups may face challenges related to discrimination, social inclusion, and adaptation to the Colombian sociocultural

context (Borda 2009; Castro 2014; Contreras Manrique et al. 2021; Guerrero Arroyave et al. 2024).

In this context, previous research has analyzed intercultural education, ethno-education, and inclusion (e.g., Alizadeh Afrouzi 2024; Balán 2025; Ossa Taborda and Barón Velandia 2024). Regarding intercultural self-efficacy, Barrios Aguirre et al. (2025) found positive associations between multicultural ideology, soft skills, and multicultural attitudes in higher education, but also a negative relationship between intergroup contact and multicultural attitudes, highlighting the importance of contact quality rather than its mere existence. However, empirical evidence on intergroup dynamics in Colombian classrooms is scarce (Montánchez-Torres et al. 2026). Examining these associations is particularly relevant in Latin America, where cultural diversity, migration, ethnicity, territorial inequalities, and educational disadvantage intersect in ways that may differ from the contexts most commonly studied in North American and European research (Piñeiro Ruiz 2025; Duque Salazar et al. 2024).

The present study examined a model that assumes that higher levels of optimal contact are associated with lower endorsement of negative stereotypes and, in turn, with higher intercultural self-efficacy.

Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1. *Optimal intergroup contact will be positively associated with teachers' intercultural self-efficacy.*

H2. *Optimal intergroup contact will be negatively associated with negative intergroup stereotypes.*

H3. *Negative intergroup stereotypes will be negatively associated with teachers' intercultural self-efficacy.*

H4. *Negative intergroup stereotypes will mediate the association between optimal intergroup contact and teachers' intercultural self-efficacy, such that higher levels of optimal contact will be associated with lower levels of negative stereotypes, which will, in turn, be associated with low intercultural self-efficacy.*

3 | Methods

The study is part of a broader research project that examines compulsory education teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward cultural diversity in different countries. The University of Costa Rica Ethics and Scientific Committee approved the project (CEC-319-2023).

This study used a cross-sectional correlational design (Cvetkovic-Vega et al. 2021) to examine associations among Colombian teachers' optimal intergroup contact, negative intergroup stereotypes, and intercultural self-efficacy. Specifically, we tested a mediation model in which optimal intergroup contact was the predictor, negative intergroup stereotypes the mediator, and teachers' intercultural self-efficacy the dependent variable.

3.1 | Participants

A total of 352 Colombian teachers completed the online survey. Inclusion criteria were: accepting informed consent and having at least 1 year of teaching experience. We included data from 322 in-service teachers after confirming eligibility based on years of experience. The sample was predominantly female (78% women, 22% men), with a mean age of 37.68 years ($SD = 13.85$). Teaching experience varied widely—ranging from 2 to 46 years—with a mean of 12.10 years ($SD = 10.08$) and a median of 9 years.

Participants taught at different educational levels, including primary, secondary, and technical education, and reported working with a wide range of culturally diverse student groups. Most participants worked in public schools and held at least a university degree, with many having completed postgraduate studies. As shown in Table 1, the most frequently reported culturally diverse student groups taught by participants were Venezuelan, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and Ecuadorian students. More information about the sample is provided in Table 1.

3.2 | Procedure

Data were collected through an online questionnaire hosted on the QuestionPro platform (<https://www.questionpro.com/es/>). We distributed the questionnaire in collaboration with two Colombian universities (Universidad Simón Bolívar and Corporación Universidad de la Costa) via email and social media to teachers working at different educational levels. Participation was voluntary, and before accessing the questionnaire, participants read an information sheet describing the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw.

3.3 | Instruments and Measures

The questionnaire included a block of sociodemographic variables and the measures of interest. All measures used have been previously validated in Latin American contexts, including Colombia (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2026; Smith-Castro et al. 2021, 2023, 2024), among teachers and the general population. Unless otherwise indicated, all scale items were answered using a five-point Likert-type response format (1 = strongly disagree/not at all, 5 = strongly agree/very much).

Sociodemographic data: data were collected on age, gender, years of teaching experience, groups that teachers encounter in the classroom, and the type of educational center they work in (private, public, or other).

Intercultural self-efficacy scale: Based on measures from the TALIS 2018 report (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD 2019), five items assessed teachers' self-perceptions of efficacy in managing intercultural classrooms (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2025). One example item is: "I can adapt my teaching methodology to the cultural diversity of my students." A total mean score from the five items was calculated, where higher values indicate higher perceived

TABLE 1 | Characteristics of the participating teachers ($N = 322$).

Characteristic	Category/statistic	Value
Gender	Women	78%
	Men	22%
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	37.68 (13.85)
Teaching experience (years)	Mean (SD)	12.10 (10.08)
Educational level	Bachelor's degree	28.1%
	Master's/ postgraduate degree	29.1%
	Doctoral degree	4.5%
	University bachelor's diploma	6.7%
	Diploma/technical degree	1.6%
	Teacher training college degree	16.9%
	Specialization degree	12.8%
Type of center	Public	54.6%
	Private	35.1%
	Other	10.1%
	Not specified	0.3%
Culturally diverse groups taught (multiple response)	Venezuelans	72.41%
	Afro-Colombians	69.73%
	Indigenous	46.36%
	Ecuadorians	7.66%
	Jews	4.98%
	Roma/Gypsies	2.30%
	Arabs	2.30%

Note: Percentages for culturally diverse student groups are based on multiple responses; therefore, they do not sum to 100%.

self-efficacy in adequately managing an intercultural classroom ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Negative intergroup stereotypes index: Based on López-Rodríguez et al. (2013), this index comprises eight adjectives measuring stereotypical attributions toward different cultural groups, distributed across four negative items (e.g., “malicious”) and four positive items (e.g., “honest”). A total mean score was calculated after reverse-coding the positive items; therefore, higher values indicate greater attribution of negative stereotypes ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Optimal intergroup contact index: This variable was measured using two direct questions from previous studies (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2025, 2026) assessing the frequency and quality of contact with members of the principal groups that teachers encounter in their classrooms (Venezuelan, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and Ecuadorian students). For contact frequency, the item was: “How often do you have direct contact with people from “these” groups?” For contact quality, the item was:

“Overall, how negative or positive would you rate the quality of the contact you have had with people from “these” groups?” The optimal intergroup contact index was calculated as the mean of these two items, with higher scores indicating more frequent and more positive contact ($r = 0.47$).

3.4 | Analytical Strategy

Statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi version 2.6.44 (The jamovi project 2025). Descriptive statistics were first calculated for the main study variables, including means, standard deviations, and reliability estimates. Mean differences across the measures were tested via a within-subjects ANOVA. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency of the multi-item Intercultural Self-efficacy scale and Negative Stereotype Index, whereas the Pearson correlation coefficient was reported for the two-item Optimal Intergroup Contact Index. Bivariate correlations among the main variables were then examined.

A simple mediation analysis was conducted using the medmod/jAMM module, specifying Optimal Intergroup Contact Index as the predictor variable (X), Negative Intergroup Stereotypes Index as the mediator (M), and Teachers' Intercultural Self-Efficacy Scale scores as the dependent variable (Y). Indirect effects were evaluated using bootstrapping with 5000 samples as recommended for mediation testing. Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals, and z statistics are reported. An a priori power analysis for a simple mediation model was conducted using the PAMLj module in jamovi (Gallucci 2024). The power analysis indicated that a minimum sample size of $N = 115$ is required to reliably detect the hypothesized mediation effect based on effect sizes for paths a and b of $\beta = 0.30$ (corresponding to a partial $R^2 = 0.09$), with a significance level (α) set at 0.05 and a target statistical power ($1 - \beta$) of 0.80. Therefore, the sample size for the present study is considered large enough to conduct the intended analyses.

4 | Results

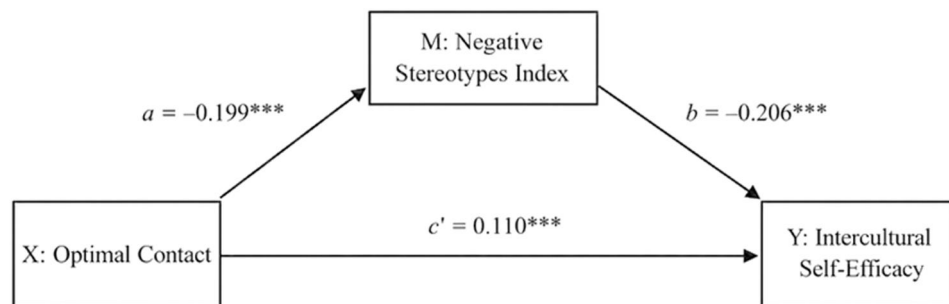
Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability estimates for the main variables. All multi-item measures showed adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.85, indicating good internal reliability. Because the optimal contact index was composed of two items, the Pearson correlation coefficient between contact frequency and contact quality was reported instead of Cronbach's alpha. Considering the response scale ranged from 1 to 5, teachers reported high levels of intercultural self-efficacy, moderate levels of optimal contact, and relatively low levels of negative stereotypes. Correlational analyses showed that greater endorsement of negative stereotypes was negatively correlated with intercultural self-efficacy and optimal contact, while higher levels of optimal intergroup contact were associated with higher intercultural self-efficacy.

Figure 1 presents the results of the hypothesized mediation model. Optimal intergroup contact was negatively associated with negative stereotypes ($a = -0.199$, $SE = 0.043$, CI

TABLE 2 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the main study variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Teacher intercultural self-efficacy	4.57 ^a	0.50	—		
2. Optimal contact	3.50 ^b	0.86	0.259***	—	
3. Negative stereotypes	1.98 ^c	0.64	−0.316***	−0.270***	—

Note: Means with different superscripts (a, b, c) differ significantly according to the within-subjects analysis of variance, $F_{(2, 626)} = 1011.61$, $p < 0.001$.
 *** $p < 0.001$.



Total effect: $c = 0.151***$, Indirect effect: $ab = 0.041***$

Note. X = Optimal Contact, M = Negative Stereotypes Index, and Y = Intercultural Self-Efficacy.

Unstandardized coefficients are reported. $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

FIGURE 1 | The mediating role of negative stereotypes in the relationship between optimal contact and intercultural self-efficacy.

[−0.281, −0.117], $z = -4.649$, $p < 0.001$). Negative stereotypes were, in turn, negatively associated with intercultural self-efficacy ($b = -0.206$, $SE = 0.045$, $CI [-0.294, -0.117]$, $z = -4.563$, $p < 0.001$). The indirect effect of optimal contact on intercultural self-efficacy through negative stereotypes was significant ($ab = 0.041$, $SE = 0.012$, $CI [0.020, 0.067]$, $z = 3.419$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, higher levels of optimal contact were associated with lower endorsement of negative stereotypes, which, in turn, was associated with higher intercultural self-efficacy. The direct effect of optimal contact on intercultural self-efficacy remained significant after accounting for negative stereotypes ($c' = 0.110$, $SE = 0.034$, $CI [0.045, 0.174]$, $z = 3.275$, $p = 0.001$), indicating partial mediation.

5 | Discussion

The present study tested whether negative intergroup stereotypes mediated the association between optimal intergroup contact and teachers' perceived intercultural self-efficacy. Although previous research has documented associations among intergroup contact, stereotypes, and self-efficacy, we found no evidence of prior studies directly testing this mediation model among teachers in the Latin American context.

The findings were consistent with all hypotheses: optimal contact was positively associated with intercultural self-efficacy (H1) and fewer negative stereotypes (H2), while negative stereotypes were associated with lower teachers' intercultural self-efficacy (H3). In addition, the direct association between

optimal contact and intercultural self-efficacy remained significant after accounting for negative stereotypes, indicating partial mediation (H4).

Results on the positive path from optimal intergroup contact to intercultural self-efficacy are consistent with previous research showing that teachers' perceived competence in diverse classrooms is linked to variables such as prior experience, school diversity, and intercultural practices (Argüello-Gutiérrez et al. 2025; Peterson and Jensen 2025; Romijn et al. 2020; Ulbricht et al. 2022). Findings also align with research on inclusive education, which shows that mastery experiences and the school environment are relevant predictors of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs toward inclusive teaching (Wilson et al. 2020). Therefore, optimal contact may be interpreted as a relational condition associated with teachers' confidence in their ability to manage intercultural classrooms.

Additionally, results on the negative path from stereotypes to intercultural self-efficacy are consistent with previous research showing that teachers' beliefs about diversity, multiculturalism, and ethnic minority students are related to expectations, stress, and self-efficacy in diverse schools (Alessandro et al. 2023; Ayala et al. 2024; Chwastek et al. 2021; Denessen et al. 2020; Glock et al. 2019; Gutentag et al. 2018). One possible interpretation is that stereotypes shape teachers' broader understanding of the demands of intercultural teaching. If teachers view culturally diverse students through deficit-oriented frames, they may overestimate the difficulties of intercultural classrooms and underestimate their own pedagogical resources.

Overall, the findings are consistent with intergroup contact theory. Limited opportunities for optimal contact may reduce teachers' access to experiences that challenge pre-existing beliefs about outgroup members (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2008). From this perspective, frequent, positive contact may provide mastery experiences and social feedback that help teachers interpret cultural diversity more constructively and feel more confident responding to it pedagogically.

This interpretation also aligns with Bandura's social cognitive theory, which holds that self-efficacy is shaped by mastery experiences, social feedback, and contextual conditions (Bandura 1997, 2000). In culturally diverse classrooms, frequent, positive interactions may give teachers concrete opportunities for successful communication, pedagogical adaptation, and relationship-building.

The mediation model provides new evidence on how intergroup contact and stereotypes shape teachers' intercultural self-efficacy. Specifically, the significant indirect effect suggests that the positive effects of optimal contact are partly driven by reduced cognitive biases that might distort teachers' interpretation of intercultural diversity in the classroom. In this sense, data highlight that teachers' intercultural self-efficacy cannot be understood solely as an individual professional disposition, but rather as a socially situated perception linked to the quality of everyday interactions with cultural diversity and the cultural beliefs that help individuals to interpret cultural diversity.

These findings are particularly relevant in the Colombian context, which is characterized by a substantial level of diversity, as well as historical inequalities linked to ethnicity, displacement, socioeconomic status, and the consequences of armed conflict. Previous studies and national reports highlight how conflict, forced displacement, and structural inequality affect educational opportunities, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups (Moreno-Trujillo 2017; Muñoz-Sánchez 2024; UNESCO 2011, 2023). Although Colombian educational policy recognizes cultural diversity and intercultural education through constitutional and legal frameworks, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how teachers' stereotypes, contact experiences, and perceived intercultural competence are connected.

Regarding the practical implications, the results suggest that teacher training and professional development should address both relational and sociocognitive dimensions of intercultural competence. Programs may benefit from combining critical reflection on biases and stereotypes with structured opportunities for frequent, positive, and meaningful contact with culturally diverse students, families, and communities. Reflection, mentoring, and feedback may help teachers recognize successful intercultural interactions as professionally meaningful experiences, thereby strengthening their confidence in managing culturally diverse classrooms (FitzGerald et al. 2019; McKeown et al. 2025; Nasie 2023; Tropp et al. 2022).

5.1 | Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for

causal inference (Nguyen et al. 2021). Even though the mediation model is theoretically grounded, reverse or reciprocal relationships are also likely. For example, teachers who feel more efficacious in intercultural situations may be more inclined to seek positive contact with culturally diverse students and, over time, may hold fewer negative stereotypes. Also, all variables were measured using self-report questionnaires, which raises the possibility of common method variance and social desirability bias (Gutentag et al. 2018; Lindell and Whitney 2001). This is especially relevant for negative stereotypes and intercultural attitudes, where participants may underreport beliefs that they perceive as socially unacceptable. Additionally, the optimal contact index was based on only two items, capturing how often teachers interact with culturally diverse students and how positively they evaluate these interactions. Although these are core aspects of contact, the index does not cover other important conditions such as equal status, cooperation, shared goals, institutional support, emotional safety, or reciprocity (Tropp et al. 2022).

Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal, mixed-methods, and experimental designs. Longitudinal studies could clarify the temporal ordering of optimal contact, negative stereotypes, and intercultural self-efficacy by examining cross-lagged associations. Finally, experimental and intervention studies could test whether programs that combine intercultural-competence development with structured intergroup contact experiences strengthen teachers' perceived efficacy in managing culturally diverse classrooms.

6 | Conclusions

This study found that optimal intergroup contact was positively associated with teachers' intercultural self-efficacy, both directly and indirectly through lower endorsement of negative stereotypes. From a practical standpoint, results highlight the importance of integrating opportunities for positive intercultural contact in school settings and teacher education initiatives that pair critical reflection on stereotypes.

Author Contributions

Catalina Argüello-Gutiérrez: project conceptualization and management, design, methodology, analysis, data collection, data curation, manuscript preparation, review, and editing. **Vanessa Smith-Castro:** methodology, analysis, data curation, manuscript preparation, review, and editing. **Nelcy Yoly Valencia-Olivero:** data collection, manuscript preparation, review, and editing. **Ángela Martín-Gutiérrez:** analysis, manuscript preparation, review, and editing.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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