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## Inclusive Education from the Voice of Principals: A Case Study in Chile

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**Abstract:** In terms of inclusive education, the work of school leaders is increasingly relevant to its implementation and achievement. This is because inclusive education has become one of the pillars of public policy in recent decades, proposing an environment where all students, regardless of their characteristics, can participate and learn, eliminating barriers that prevent access to education and ensuring that all students can achieve quality-learning goals. In this context, school principals are a key component in the development of inclusive schools, as they influence school development and management. This study aims to understand primary school principals' perceptions of the concept of inclusive education and the challenges posed by its implementation. A case study was conducted in which two primary school principals from the south-central region of Chile were interviewed. The study reveals four categories of the school's role: school exclusion, inclusive school, and educational community as central elements from the principals' perspective. The results of the study reveal that factors such as professional teams, financial and material resources, and the construction of school infrastructure are considered essential requirements for achieving inclusive education. Principals express a favorable attitude toward the implementation of inclusive education, but they recognize that there are significant challenges that limit its effective implementation.

**Keywords:** Elementary School, Qualitative, Interview, Attitudes, Educational Community.

### 1. Introduction

From 1994 to date, the notion of inclusive education has evolved from a disability-centered approach to an approach focused on creating inclusive education for all children and youth (Ainscow, 2020). This progress implies reconfiguring school policy, redefining its daily practices, and transforming school culture to address the diversity of actors that inhabit it adequately. In this sense, Armijo-Cabrera (2018) proposes that school-based research focuses on identifying "good practices" or "inclusive practices" that could be inventoried and replicated throughout the school system. Consequently, inclusive education challenges traditional schooling and emphasizes the scope of standardization and homogenization in the educational process.

Inclusion is not only a terminological issue, but has also been a challenge in practical terms (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2021; Messiou, 2017). Inclusion must be understood from a dynamic and systemic approach. In an increasingly complex world, new groups of excluded people may emerge. It is, therefore, incumbent on those who are aware of this to maintain this state of constant vigilance in the struggle for a more just and democratic world. The measures adopted by countries are still insufficient and have an incipient impact on educational practice. Possibly, this is due to the complexity of the transformations demanded by inclusive education and the multiple factors that interact in each context for its implementation (Ainscow et al., 2019). In this sense, one of the most significant challenges faced by the countries of the region is how to reduce the distance between a discourse of inclusion loaded with good intentions and educational practice, as shown by the studies of Amor et al. (2019).

Inclusive education can include all children and youth regardless of individual differences, including race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, or socioeconomic status (Florian, 2019). This conceptualization complexifies the concept by opening other possibilities for intervention, and consequently, the



challenge is more significant and challenging for the school, although it enriches the educational process. The literature argues that teachers' understanding and attitudes about Inclusive Education are fundamental to achieving the effectiveness of inclusive classroom practices, primarily influenced by teachers' beliefs as a central component of teachers' professional identity (Domović *et al.*, 2017). Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion vary depending on resources, students' needs, their own skills and classroom experience (Gray *et al.*, 2017; Moberg *et al.*, 2019; Olsson *et al.*, 2019; Roose *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, teachers and their actions can prevent social stigma, stereotypes, and segregation, given the diversity of sociocultural contexts present in classrooms.

School principals play a fundamental role in the development of inclusive schools. Scientific literature indicates that their leadership can prevent various discriminatory situations (Bhowmik *et al.*, 2023). Headteachers have different beliefs and adopt different strategies to promote inclusion. Some of these reflect practices based on traditional school leadership, while others lean more towards a social justice approach (Lakkala, 2021). To create inclusive environments, headteachers must take multiple factors into account and apply different methods to guide the work of the educational community (Ainscow *et al.*, 2016; Slee, 2019). In terms of inclusive education, supporting collaboration among teaching staff becomes increasingly essential in the areas of responsibility of school principals to mobilize and influence the process through democratic management in which everyone feels responsible for achieving the goals of the school that aspires to provide quality education (Generoso & Moreira, 2023). According to De Matthews *et al.* (2020) and Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020), the success of implementing inclusive education in a school can be guided by the head teacher's vision of inclusive education.

It is on this issue that the objective of this study is to understand the perception of elementary school principals regarding the notion of inclusive education and the challenges involved in its implementation. This study is relevant for three main reasons. First, the principal's vision allows understanding the current reality in a particular context to advance in support of strategies pertinent to the local reality. Second, it allows to guide the development of institutional programs that can strengthen knowledge on this topic. Third, it makes visible the barriers, opportunities, and challenges the principals perceive, broadening the discussion to a key factor in the educational communities.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Paradigm, Approach and Study Design

The development of this research is framed within an interpretive paradigm. This perspective has been especially suggested for studying social phenomena since it allows an understanding of reality in its historical and social context based on the meaning given to it by its protagonists (Maeda *et al.*, 2022). In turn, a qualitative approach was adopted to identify trends and explore new dimensions through an iterative, flexible, and rigorous process (Nassaji, 2020). Finally, the design of this study is circumscribed to a case study, as it seeks to generate contextualized and relevant knowledge from a detailed, in-depth, and comprehensive look at a specific context (Priya, 2021).

Case studies, as reported in the literature (Viera, 2023), provide an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena in specific contexts. In this study, the opinions of two principals regarding inclusive education allow us to explore the dynamics and particularities of how inclusion is conceived and developed in schools. On the other hand, the sample, being intentional and small, allows for an increase in the density of the information collected. It is pertinent to point out that the procedures used in this study were based on the principles of ethical safeguards. In addition, this research was approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee (CEC) of the Universidad Católica del Maule, as stated in Act N° 39/2023.

### 2.2 Case Description

Considering the objective and characteristics of this study, a purposive sampling of relevant cases was chosen (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), i.e., institutions whose institutional educational project explicitly established as one of its educational hallmarks, the promotion and development of inclusive education within the school establishment were chosen. In this context, two elementary school principals, both under municipal administration and in south-central Chile, agreed to participate. Principal 1 (d1) is male, 63 years old, has 20 years of classroom experience and 10 years



of management experience, has a master's degree in educational management, and has never received or participated in a formal training course on inclusive education. Director 2 (d2) is also male, is 49 years old, has 20 years of classroom experience and 6 years working in management, has a master's degree in educational management, and has not received any formal training on the subject.

### 2.3 Data Production Technique

The technique selected for the production of the data was the in-depth interview (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020) since it offers the possibility of delving deeper into a specific topic, encourages the expression of ideas, and allows capturing the particularities of the social and cultural context in which the participants operate (Ruslin et al., 2022). An interview script with 10 open-ended questions was designed to guide the conversation. Three judges reviewed this material, experts in the subject matter (inclusive education) and educational research, who provided recommendations for improving the proposal. Based on their comments, questions were asked such as: what do you understand by inclusive education; on whom does inclusive education fall; what does it mean to you that inclusive education is a right; how do you put the principles of inclusive education into daily practice in your educational community? This study's principal author conducted each interview between May and June 2023. For this purpose, a private and comfortable space was reserved for the participants. Each interview lasted two hours. The recording was done with a digital recorder.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis plan considered three stages. First, each interview was transcribed into a Word file. Then, in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, a code was assigned to each document and to the accounts provided. Second, the files were imported into NVivo 14. This qualitative analysis software offers tools that organize and systematize data processing. By reading the documents, a thematic analysis of the narratives was performed (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic saturation or sufficiency was achieved through an iterative process in which the collection and analysis of qualitative data proceeded in parallel. When no new dimensions or categories were generated, data saturation and thematic sufficiency were considered to have been achieved.

This type of analysis allows the identification of patterns or emerging themes by creating codes. These codes constitute units of meaning that can then be grouped into categories and/or subcategories (Gibbs, 2012; Locke *et al.*, 2022). The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim into Word files. The data were coded inductively to obtain categories first and then subcategories. This procedure was assisted by the NVivo-15 program, which facilitated data coding, information source management, and subsequent categorization during the coding process (Resende, 2025). Initially, open and inductive coding was performed, in which fragments of the data (words, lines, segments, and incidents) were studied. Next, axial coding was used with the idea of relating the categories to subcategories (Akkaya, 2023; Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). To ensure reliability among coders, significant patterns were identified and labeled in the code book. The researchers applied the same code book to the data and consistently agreed on the codes, indicating a stable and credible analysis (Cole, 2024).

To avoid bias in the analysis, the data were reviewed independently by the researchers and on several occasions during the course of the study, in order to detect inconsistencies that could affect the interpretation of the findings, as reported by Florczak (2022). On the other hand, the relationship with the participants was maintained under the ethical guidelines for social science research. Finally, the open coding process was conducted, and three of the authors of this paper participated independently. Subsequently, a meeting was held among all the authors to carry out selective and axial coding. This meeting allowed agreements to be reached to construct the categories and subcategories.

## 3. Results

The analysis of the corpus of data obtained from the interviews conducted with the principals of the educational establishments under study allows four main categories to emerge from the discourse of the participants and the theoretical framework. Consequently, the perception and understanding of inclusive education is constituted by the following categories (see Table 1).



**Table 1.** Category systematization matrix

Category	Descriptor
Role of the school	The role of the school is to provide all children with the opportunity to develop their potential, values and knowledge necessary to live, learn and work in a diverse society.
School exclusion	Exclusion in the school environment would be a form of aggression in which children are exposed to different situations of discrimination that affect their social relations, resulting in a lack of participation and acceptance within a peer group.
Inclusive school	Inclusive schooling is understood as a transformative approach that fosters an environment in which all children, regardless of their abilities, feel valued and can access and participate fully in high quality, equitable education.
Educational community	A community considers an environment in which children, parents, guardians, teachers and administrators feel a sense of belonging, participate fully in the educational process and work together to address the diversity of students and their families.

Note. Own elaboration

### 3.1 Category Role of the School

Principals' perceptions regarding inclusive education are first analyzed in the category called Role of the School. This category is composed of two subcategories: teaching learning and Leadership (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Subcategory systematization matrix

Subcategories	Descriptor
Teaching-Learning	To enhance the learning and participation of all boys and girls according to their individual needs.
Leadership	Generate instances of democratic participation with the community towards inclusive education.

Note. Own elaboration

The following are the most significant results of the subcategory "Teaching-Learning," which is revealed in the stories of the interviewed subjects as opinions and evaluative judgments regarding what the principals conceive as the Role of the School, manifested in the following stories:

"In this case, last year we had a child with ASD in pre-kindergarten who moved to kindergarten and there has been no problem, that is, the parents and the teachers of the multidisciplinary team work with him without any problem. (d1)

"Yes, unfortunately, the ability to learn is a condition for exclusion or inclusion, but we should have the tools to reverse this dysfunctionality, which is characterized by taking care of those who learn less during a class; it is a natural tendency, and we do not take care of those who learn more, that is already exclusion." (d2)

From the accounts, the importance of a pedagogical practice focused on attention to diversity, in favor of differentiated strategies based on equity, and in favor of active participation of all children is revealed. Principals recognize that teaching inclusively is not achieved spontaneously but that there must be an intentional reflection and collaboration where the focus is on equity and the participation of all educational agents, which is the key to transforming traditional practice towards a genuinely inclusive education.

Regarding the subcategory "Leadership," principals emphasize that their role is fundamental for achieving inclusive education, stating that there is a direct relationship between the school leadership action they deploy and the implementation of an inclusive perspective. In this regard, the interviewees' accounts point out the following:



"So, to the extent that I show my teachers that they can do different things, because I am going to support them, because I am going to defend them, [...] otherwise they continue to do the same thing that all the other teachers do." (d1)

"In my school, there is no exclusion; there are things that happen outside, they are parents and the use of WhatsApp, where they themselves exclude others, but I do not get involved in that, that is something else, but inside the school, that is, what I call from the door to here, neither with parents, nor with students, nor with teachers there are situations of exclusion." (d2)

### 3.2 School Exclusion Category

The analysis of the second category, School Exclusion, reveals the interviewed principals' perception of Inclusive Education through two subcategories: Forms of Exclusion and Conceptualization (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Subcategory systematization matrix

Subcategories	Descriptor
Forms of Exclusion	Reasons that generate and develop exclusion actions at school or in a peer group.
Notion of Education Inclusive	Refers to the understanding, perception or representation that the actors of the educational community have about IE.

Note. Own elaboration

The subcategory "Forms of Exclusion" considers motives and actions that generate exclusion, an issue observed in the following accounts:

"The children, generally, they do not exclude themselves; the teacher generally excludes the child who makes his work a little difficult...the one who has to support more, the one who has to be more attentive, the one who has to be there for him to do things, so he generally avoids that". (d1)

"They are also excluded because of their education, their socioeconomic situation, their social situation, their low performance, when I talk about economic situation, generally the children, the older ones, marginalize the younger ones because they see them as poor." (d1)

The situations of exclusion analyzed reflect the need to address and deepen pedagogical, social, and attitudinal barriers. Overcoming these difficulties may require teacher training in behavior management and the implementation of psychoeducational strategies under a comprehensive approach. The work of the educational community would be essential in promulgating inclusive values that strengthen inclusion in the school context.

At another level of analysis, interviewees relate how they conceive inclusive education, in terms of the subcategory "Notion of Inclusive Education" how much they state that:

"I understand that it is associated with non-discrimination, that is, that all students can learn in the same environment, this also is transferred in the relationship with the school staff [...] Inclusion means that we should all be able to be included in the public system." (d2)

"Inclusion refers to the student, mainly to the student, because our students are all different, so we should have a standard of inclusion, regardless of the diagnoses they may have or the place where the children come from." (d1)

The stories show the notion of educational inclusion associated with the learning of "all" students in a public education system. In this context, the principals perceive that students are all different. However, having an inclusion standard, without the diagnoses they have being determinant, would allow for differentiated and inclusive treatment.

"Inclusive education is a fundamental right, which, in my view, we must try to ensure, since our main task today is that students acquire learning, so it is our duty, our mandate, finally." (d2)

The principal's account shows that his perception of inclusive education is related to a "fundamental" right. This right would be associated with students achieving the expected learning and, therefore, would become a mandate for teachers, the management team, and the educational community as a whole.



### 3.3 Inclusive School Category

The analysis of the Inclusive School category reveals the principals' perceptions of Inclusive Education through two subcategories: disposition to Inclusion and Attention to Diversity (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Subcategory systematization matrix

Subcategories	Descriptor
Willingness to include	Refer to a positive attitude and predisposition towards the development of actions in favor of inclusive education.
Attention to diversity	It refers to fostering in children the value of differences in favor of the social and cultural diversity of those who make up their classroom group.

Note. Own elaboration.

According to the model worked, and based on the accounts of the key informants, the information received and the opinions regarding the subcategory "Disposition towards Inclusion" are analyzed based on the following accounts:

"Information generates empathy, allows us to overcome barriers, to know what is happening, generates understanding, good disposition towards inclusion." (d1)

"In my opinion, all of us have the responsibility to include, I am as responsible as the teacher, I am as responsible as the janitor, as the man who does the cleaning, the whole educational community must be willing." (d2)

The principals' accounts make clear how relevant the disposition towards inclusive education is; keeping the educational community informed would generate empathy and understanding. On the other hand, the notion of community and the role that each of the school's actors must fulfill is evident, visualizing that inclusion requires assuming a responsibility shared by the community.

The second subcategory of analysis of the principals' perception refers to "Attention to Diversity" within the framework of the Inclusive School category, which is reflected in the following accounts:

"The SAE system includes all children without distinction. In fact, the SAE system does not ask if the children have a diagnosis, if they are PIE or not; the system has certain selection criteria according to the parents' application and sends them; once they are here, we see what we do". (d2)

"We do not have problems with children with a diagnosis, ASD, for example, have been inserted without any problem in the classroom. Just like other children with difficulties, we cannot leave them out of the system, it is our obligation to attend them" (d1).

This subcategory reveals access to establishments without discrimination through the SAE system. However, difficulties arise when the school must implement strategies to address diversity. A reception and ethical duty is visualized where attention to children with SEN is emphasized, achieving, from their perspective, a successful integration. However, while the regulations ensure universal access for children, inclusion requires strengthening institutional support to make it effective. They argue that the SAE system advances inclusion by allowing unrestricted access. They emphasize the relevance of communication and the need for structural conditions to be a priority.

### 3.4 Educational Community Category

The analysis of the fourth category, Educational Community, reveals that the principals interviewed perceive their educational community from the perspective of inclusive education. This perspective considers an environment in which students, parents, teachers, and principals work together to address the needs of children, which is reflected in two subcategories: Family Educational Agent and Collaborative Work (see Table 5).



**Table 5.** Subcategory systematization matrix

Subcategories	Descriptor
Family as an educational agent	Influence of the family in the development of a child from an educational and inclusive perspective.
Collaborative work	School personnel, family and institutional agents working synergistically.

Note. Own elaboration

First of all, the subcategory "Family as Educational Agent" is analyzed through the key informants' accounts, as shown in the following accounts:

"What happens is that the family is always going to look out for the good of their children; in that aspect, I believe that they hinder the inclusion processes, but when they also learn to include, they are much more empathetic with other students." (d1)

"[...] the family can learn from inclusion, but it is difficult, they see it as favoritism towards certain children, and that is natural, to think first of their child, but it is important that they learn to include others, also to be empathetic with our students, who are going through learning difficulties or in other areas." (d2)

The family as an educational agent has a crucial role in IE; one of them is the link that develops between families and the school, which should be favored through strategies of awareness, effective communication, and the formation of inclusive values for parents and students. Active collaboration between both agents is essential to promote IE, transforming the school into a space that enhances children's capabilities by mitigating barriers from the family environment. In this context, the school is the place where tools are provided to improve family dynamics that negatively affect children. Consequently, a closer link between the family and the school would be necessary so that education is not only the school's responsibility but a joint effort.

Regarding the subcategory "Collaborative Work," the directors interviewed pointed out the following:

"[...] where everyone is working collaboratively, where the classroom team meets and works and plans, looking at the pros and cons to work well in the classroom, analyzing the children they have in the class, looking at the programming, studying the planning" (d2).

"[...] as a pedagogical strategy, the teacher and the psychologist conduct workshops on behavior, discipline, empathy, responsibility, and they involve all students equally, so everyone has a moment where they can express themselves, where they can participate" (d1).

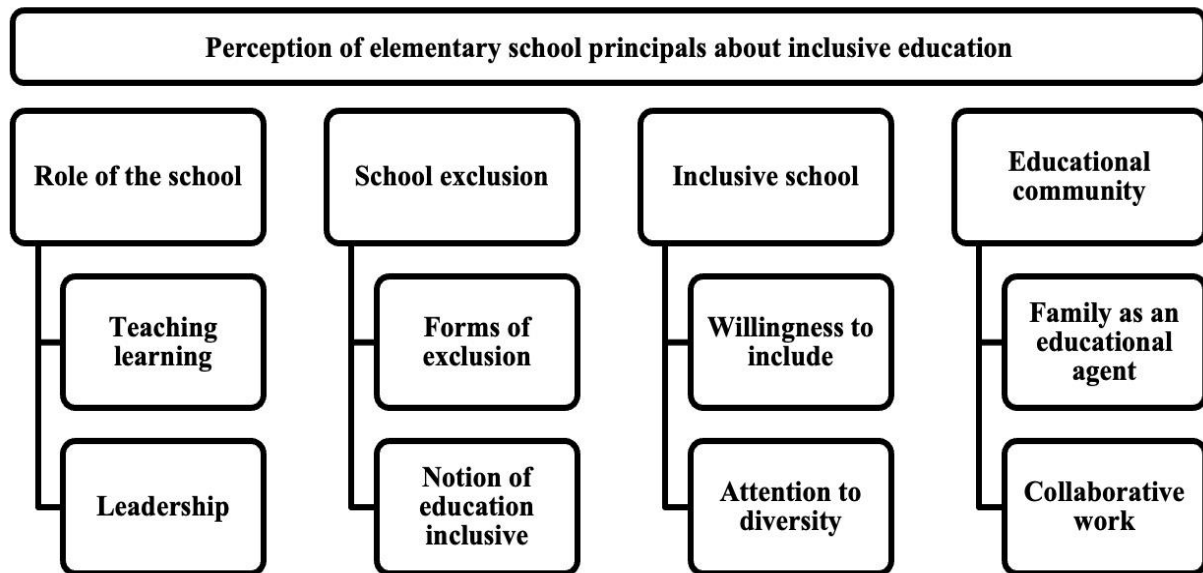
The principals interviewed state the relevance of collaborative work not only enriches pedagogical practice but also makes it possible to attend to the diversity of students. On the other hand, the planning and strengthening workshops from an interdisciplinary perspective would favor socioemotional skills and equitable participation in the classroom. These practices confirm that collaboration and joint reflection are essential to contribute to inclusive environments. Therefore, fostering communication within the educational community and a genuine commitment from all those involved is necessary. To summarise, the Figure 1 shows each of the categories and subcategories presented in the results.

The study's findings show that principals recognize resource constraints and family attitudes as obstacles to achieving inclusive education. In this regard, the Chilean case clearly demonstrates the tension that exists between the implementation of inclusive policies, which are more regulatory in nature, and the limited structural conditions and significant shortcomings that hinder their effective implementation. Consequently, inclusive education requires not only laws, but also sustained investment of resources, teacher training, networking, and interdisciplinary work to respond adequately to the diversity of students in the early childhood classroom.

## 4. Discussion

The findings of the study show that the principals surveyed understand inclusive education as a fundamental right and an ethical mandate.





**Figure 1.** Categories and subcategories

According to their accounts, achieving inclusive education in schools depends on various factors, such as overcoming exclusionary practices, building an inclusive school culture, and, essentially, strengthening the school community. In this regard, leadership becomes strategic, as it allows for the support and motivation of teaching teams. The principals maintain that in order to make inclusive education a reality, policies must transcend the declarative sphere and become concrete training strategies and pedagogical resources. Finally, they propose a closer link with families and the community, in order to overcome individualistic views and move towards collaborative and inclusive values.

In the present research and the framework of the category Role of the School, the principals interviewed emphasize the possibility of enhancing learning and participation of all children according to their individual needs and that all students have the right to access learning, regardless of their condition, and respecting this premise would allow achieving inclusive education. The above is in agreement with the studies of [Juvonen \*et al.\* \(2019\)](#) and [Molbaek \(2018\)](#), in which it is established that research on inclusion is in close connection with research on effective teaching strategies and classroom management, providing teachers with new opportunities to develop more inclusive schools. On the other hand, researchers argue that to facilitate inclusion, school leaders must be aware of the group and interpersonal dynamics that occur in the school ([Lambrecht \*et al.\*, 2022](#)).

In line with the above, some studies asked principals of different types of schools about the requirements and changes needed to implement inclusive education. The results indicate that factors such as staffing, training, facilities, cooperation, smaller classes, professional support, and leadership are perceived as necessary conditions for a successful realization of inclusive education ([Billingsley \*et al.\*, 2018](#); [Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2023](#)). On the other hand, the attitude and willingness of principals as leaders of educational institutions would play a central role in making "standardized" education change towards a more diverse, relevant, and inclusive curriculum.

The research reports a second category called School Exclusion, a form of aggression in which children are exposed to different situations of exclusion that affect their social relations. This fundamentally implies a lack of participation and acceptance within a peer group. In this regard, the literature reports that, in England, the term refers to formal exclusion, where students are excluded for a short period (fixed-term exclusion) or excluded from school altogether (permanent exclusion) due to their behavior. The study identified four key factors for successful reintegration into school, which include (a) making substantial adjustments to the physical environment, (b) promoting strong relationships between staff and students, (c) understanding students' specific needs, and (d) targeted efforts to improve students' well-being ([Brede \*et al.\*, 2017](#)).

In line with the above, [Slee \(2019\)](#) notes that the struggle to achieve a status of belonging in education exposes the deep structure of social exclusion represented and reproduced by schooling. Consequently, the quest

for Inclusive Education is undermined by various factors, including the appropriation of the discourse of inclusion by deeply conservative forces committed to sustaining exclusion and the ethic of competitive individualism.

In the study by [Wesselmann \*et al.\* \(2017\)](#), it was reported that limited understanding of children's specific needs and almost non-existent support from some schools were perceived as attributable factors of exclusion and on the other hand, they stated that inadequate school environments and lack of staff recognition and understanding regarding the inclusive education perspective, were key causes of students' increasing behavioral problems, making it impossible to access mainstream education.

The third category under analysis is called Inclusive School, understood for this research as a transformative approach that fosters an environment where all children, regardless of their abilities, feel valued and can access and participate fully in high-quality, equitable education. In this regard, [Ainscow \(2020\)](#) points out that there is no single model of what an inclusive school looks like; however, highly inclusive schools have in common that they are welcoming and supportive places for all their students, particularly those who experience difficulties.

On the other hand, in the [Bangou \*et al.\* \(2021\)](#) study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect and document successful practices in elementary schools within a Canadian province. Thematic analysis revealed a common belief in the central importance of learning and relationships for all students, a shared commitment to inclusion, overall teacher accountability in the classroom, collaborative teamwork, and a favorable attitude toward inclusion on the part of the school.

According to the literature, attitudes toward inclusive education and the perception of inclusive teaching practices and resources are relevant factors for implementing inclusion. In [Paseka & Schwab's \(2020\)](#) study conducted in Germany, it is noted that descriptive results from semi-structured interviews conducted with a sample of 2000 parents (telephone interviews) showed that parents' attitudes toward the inclusion of a student with a physical or learning disability were somewhat positive, while attitudes towards students with behavioral disorders or mental disabilities were relatively neutral. Consequently, these findings would align with what was reported by the principals interviewed since they explicitly point out that, according to their experience, it is possible to achieve inclusive education. However, this necessarily requires a favorable disposition towards an attitudinal transformation in favor of all children.

The principals mentioned that attention to student diversity continues to be considered one of the main challenges to be promoted in the current educational system. This is because a school culture in which people accept diversity in the classroom can positively impact the entire school community by allowing students to improve their social skills and develop empathy ([De Matthews \*et al.\*, 2020](#)). In this line, the findings of this study highlight the equitable access promoted by the SAE system and the willingness of principals towards inclusion. However, they point out that progress must be made to ensure equitable learning for all students.

The findings of this report include a fourth category, the educational community. This is understood as the environment in which children, parents, guardians, teachers and headteachers have a sense of belonging, participate in the educational process and work together to address diversity. In [Dano and Arfasa's \(2020\)](#) study in Ethiopia, it is reported that school principals considered the attitudes and willingness of the educational community and society as essential prerequisites for the successful implementation of inclusive education. This background suggests that adopting a holistic approach can promote inclusion, as it is not limited to education and school, but is also a relevant issue for the entire educational community.

[Matthews \*et al.\* \(2020\)](#) point out that headteachers consider the most common problems they face to be related to students' parents and special educational needs. In addition, they also stated that some families cannot accept the characteristics of their sons and daughters, which damages the relationship with teachers. In this context, the quality of the link between family and school is essential to facing current educational challenges.

On the other hand, the findings of the study underline that cooperation is considered necessary for a successful implementation of inclusion; however, time is needed to allow for cooperation and opportunities for consultation and discussion between staff/teachers from different professions so that different competencies can be used optimally in favor of inclusion. The study conducted in Germany by [Görel and Hellmich \(2022\)](#) highlights that cooperation is a requirement that school principals consider essential for a successful realization of inclusion. This



refers to cooperation between staff, regular and special education teachers, and between regular and special education teachers.

The findings of the study are related to the guidelines issued by UNESCO (2017), which focus on ensuring inclusion and equity in education with resources, interdisciplinary teams, and managerial leadership that ensure learning and participation for all children. From the perspective of leadership models, the study could be linked to international trends in terms of Instructional Leadership, which focuses on supporting teaching and diversifying pedagogical strategies; Distributed Leadership, which emphasizes collaboration across the entire school community; and Social Justice Leadership, insofar as the principals interviewed value inclusion from an ethical perspective that favors equity in education and in schools in particular (Lakkala, 2021; Theoharis, 2024).

Based on the results, it is possible to conclude that headteachers understand that inclusive education encompasses ethical principles, practical requirements and professional commitment. Similarly, they state that inclusion is a right that requires more effective policies, curricular flexibility and adequate resources. As leaders, they believe that their role must transcend administration in order to promote initiatives that articulate an equitable and transformative perspective.

## 5. Conclusions

This study revealed that participants understand inclusive education as a fundamental right that should be promoted by the entire educational community. They show a favourable attitude towards the implementation of inclusive strategies, but recognize that there are significant challenges to their implementation, such as a shortage of resources, a lack of adequate training, and resistance from some members of the school community, such as parents and teachers.

In the study, the principals interviewed declare an adequate commitment to inclusive education, and their perspective is more pedagogical in nature, without an approach to problematize and discuss the social and cultural structures that support practices of inclusion-exclusion in schools. This is necessary because, if the inequalities of the system are not confronted, the intervention focuses on methodological adaptations in the classroom. Consequently, there is a need for leadership with a critical and transformative orientation, aligned with international policy frameworks.

The headteachers point out that exclusion from school is a multifaceted problem. According to their account, it is essential to transform school culture to promote inclusion, which involves making curricular and structural adjustments, changing attitudes and also practices within the school. This research shows that the educational community is willing to promote inclusion; however, headteachers perceive that families hinder the achievement of inclusive education due to their dysfunctionality and the resulting relationship with children.

An important element that emerges from the directors' accounts is the importance of collaborative work. Both emphasize that leadership that mobilizes the practices of teachers, families and students is essential to promoting inclusive education. This leadership must promote an environment of democratic participation and mutual support. In this context, collaboration is not limited to interaction between teachers and headteachers, but also requires the active participation of families in the educational process.

Despite the limitations that persist in the educational system, the principals interviewed express a firm commitment to transforming their schools into inclusive and welcoming spaces. To achieve this, they emphasize the need for continuous training and coherent educational policies that facilitate access to resources and professional support. Only in this way will it be possible to create school environments that truly value diversity and promote the full development of all students.

From a comparative perspective, the experience analyzed offers lessons that can be transferred to other contexts in Latin America. On the one hand, it shows that even in systems that are making progress toward universal access, challenges related to addressing diversity persist, a common issue in different countries. On the other hand, it highlights the need for inclusive policies to be accompanied by training strategies and specific pedagogical resources, so that they are not limited to declarative statements. Finally, the case confirms that school inclusion

should be understood as a collective and dynamic process, where management action, teacher training, and community participation constitute pillars that can be replicated in different educational realities.

## 5.1 Limitations

For the proper interpretation of the findings of this research, it is suggested that the following limitations be considered. First, due to the nature of the case study, we recommend avoiding generalizing the conclusions. Future research could consider this aspect and increase the number of participants. Second, there is likely an interpretative bias in the data analysis; nevertheless, at least three of the authors of this study participated in its coding independently to guarantee the rigor of this procedure. Finally, it is essential to consider that the results of this work only consider the participants' discourse. Using other techniques and/or instruments could enrich understanding the phenomenon studied.

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María Muñoz-Oyarce: Conceptualization, Data acquisition, Analysis, Writing-Original Draft, Editing, Review and Final Approval. Vanessa Valdebenito: Supervision, Analysis, Writing-Original Draft, Editing, Review and Final Approval. Mirko Aguilar-Valdés: Analysis, Writing-Original Draft, Editing, Review and Final Approval.

### Does this article screen for similarity?

Yes

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is also no financial interest to report. The author certifies that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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