INCLUSION, NEURODIVERSITY, AND COLLABORATIVE WORK MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Chile has committed to international agreements to strengthen inclusive education in regular classrooms. Policies such as the School Integration Program (PIE) and Decree 170 have aimed to ensure equitable access for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, inclusion remains framed within a deficit-based model rather than a rights-based approach that embraces diversity. This qualitative multiple-case study examined inclusive education management from the perspectives of neurodiversity and social heterogeneity. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations in four educational institutions in the Biobío and Ñuble regions. Results: The findings reveal several barriers to effective inclusion: A limited understanding of inclusion among educators and administrators. Dependence on individual teachers' goodwill rather than institutional commitment. Insufficient training in diversity and inclusive practices. Discussion: While Chile has made progress in formal policies, the practical implementation of inclusion remains inconsistent. A shift from a deficit-based view to a model that values diversity as an educational strength is necessary. Schools require structural changes, better teacher training, and sustainable policies to ensure meaningful inclusion. Conclusion: Achieving true educational inclusion in Chile demands a paradigm shift toward systemic and culturally responsive approaches. Policies must move beyond administrative compliance to foster a genuinely inclusive learning environment for all students.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is well known that Chile has made commitments to international organizations to strengthen an inclusive educational strategy in regular classrooms [1, 2]. This effort has driven the development of policies aimed at promoting equity in access to education for students traditionally classified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) [3, 4]. However, one of the main challenges has been the real understanding of the concept of inclusion, as many of these policies tend to focus on need and deficit rather than on a perspective of diversity and rights [3, 4, and 5]. Since the 1990s, with the implementation of the School Integration Programs (PIE), the country has sought to provide support within regular classrooms for students with SEN. In this regard, recent years have seen the introduction of new technical guidelines for the operation of PIE within the educational system [6, 7]. One of the key milestones in this process was Decree 170 [8], which established a primarily administrative regulatory framework governing the allocation of special education funding and defining the criteria for identifying students with SEN, as well as the professionals responsible for their support. The PIE framework has been structured around Collaborative Teaching Work (TCD), a strategy based on co-teaching between regular education teachers and special education teachers [3, 4, and 9]. Over time, this approach has been recognized as a key tool for promoting educational inclusion. Numerous studies have supported its importance [10, 11, and 12]. However, the implementation of PIE has faced some resistance, particularly from regular classroom teachers, who often perceive collaborative work as a loss of autonomy in their teaching. Previous research has highlighted ambivalent perceptions of TCD: while some teachers appreciate the opportunities for dialogue and support it fosters, others see it as a practice driven more by formal requirements and administrative compliance than by a genuine commitment to inclusion [13, 14]. In this regard, various studies have emphasized that educational inclusion should be understood as a continuous process of transformation and adaptation, recognizing the diversity of students and the need for ongoing adjustments in teaching practices [15, 16, and 17]. The present study is framed within the Theory of Social Representations (SR), as it seeks to understand the meanings that teachers, students, administrators, and parents assign to TCD and co-teaching in both in-person and virtual settings. From this perspective, SR refers to the ways in which people construct shared meanings about social phenomena based on their interactions with others [18]. These representations are not static; rather, they evolve based on the influence of collective thinking and dominant discourses within a given group. In the educational field, analyzing social representations has been key to understanding how teachers perceive inclusion and how these perceptions influence their pedagogical practices [5, 19]. Likewise, research has shown that students' and teachers' representations of inclusion affect classroom interactions and the acceptance of peers with SEN [4]. As previously mentioned, regular education has traditionally used the term Special Educational Needs (SEN). However, there has been a gradual shift away from this term, as the neurodiversity perspective recognizes that all students have diverse learning styles and specific support requirements. Instead, terms such as "support needs," "neurodivergence," or "neurominorities" are being suggested [14, 5]. This shift in perspective is crucial for moving toward a broader understanding of diversity and avoiding an inclusion model that relies on categorizing students based on their deficits. In today's educational spaces, both in-person and virtual, collaborative teaching plays a central role in the inclusion of neurodivergent students within regular classrooms. However, virtual education presents additional challenges, such as the digital divide and the lack of technological training among some teachers, which can create new forms of exclusion for certain students with SEN [20, 4]. In addition to these challenges, teachers are increasingly using technology to support diagnostic and psychoeducational processes [5]. It is essential that the design of inclusive strategies within regular classrooms incorporates the neurodiversity perspective and co-teaching as part of a collaborative approach. Recognizing and valuing neurological differences as part of human diversity not only strengthens the implementation of programs such as PIE but also allows inclusion to extend to other social and cultural spaces, promoting a more equitable educational model that respects diversity without reducing inclusion to a mere issue of need and deficit. As stated in the introduction, Chile has committed to international organizations to uphold school inclusion policies within regular educational contexts. This commitment has been materialized through the School Integration Program (PIE) in state-subsidized educational institutions and through the implementation of Decree 170 [8]. The goal of PIE is to facilitate the inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in regular education settings. SEN refers to characteristics that

hinder students' equitable access to learning compared to their peers, which may stem from physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities, learning difficulties, as well as emotional and social factors [21]. As has been widely debated in academic discourse, the concept of SEN remains a subject of discussion. However, from a legal standpoint, it is still in use in Chile. Currently, there is a move toward a more inclusive conception based on neurodiversity and neurodivergence, recognizing that inclusion is not merely about integrating those who are different but rather about acknowledging and valuing diversity as an inherent aspect of the human condition, ensuring equality in dignity and rights [4, 3]. As in other countries with similar commitments, in Chile, Special Educational Needs (SEN) are classified into two broad categories: Transitory Special Educational Needs (T-SEN) and Permanent Special Educational Needs (P-SEN) [8]. MINEDUC Decree 170 establishes the specific criteria for schools to receive state subsidies and details the required specialist profiles for each case. International experience has shown that the goal of inclusion should not only focus on access to education but also on effective participation within the school and social environment [22]. In this regard, the transition from integration to inclusion implies a fundamental shift in educational conception: while integration seeks to incorporate students into the system, inclusion demands a structural transformation to respond to diversity. To advance toward truly inclusive education, it is not enough to implement isolated measures; it is necessary to design and incorporate public policies that foster inclusion comprehensively [23, 5]. In Chile, this process is hindered by the widespread perception among school administrators and teachers that attending to students with SEN is the exclusive responsibility of specialized professionals and Special Education Program (PIE) coordinators [17, 20, and 24]. This fragmented approach may be associated with individualism and the balkanization of teaching work [25, 26]. However, experience indicates that schools with the best inclusion results are those where the entire educational community works together to achieve these objectives [27]. A true inclusive education requires a cultural and structural change involving the entire school community [28, 29, and 22]. Along these lines, studies conducted by Sagredo [3] have highlighted the importance of family and community participation in the inclusion process. Similarly, Sagredo [30] emphasizes the need to promote inclusive values throughout the school community. Another key aspect of educational inclusion is leadership in school administration. Various studies have shown that school management and leadership competencies are fundamental for promoting inclusion [31]. One of the most relevant aspects that school administrators and educational leaders must address in an inclusive context is managing collaborative work and maintaining a positive organizational climate [31]. Collaborative Work (CW) has been consolidated as a key strategy to address diversity in today's classrooms [20, 4]. Evidence indicates that, along with co-teaching, it has been one of the most effective methodologies for educational inclusion. To achieve true inclusion, collaborative work must be planned, interdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary [11, 10], fostering synergy between general and special education teachers to enhance learning for all students. Given the above, this study poses the following research question: How is the Chilean educational context managing the right to inclusion beyond an integration project focused on needs and deficits?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is framed within a qualitative approach and an interpretive paradigm [32, 33]. Adopting a methodological approach based on ethnography and grounded theory [34, 35]. Its objective is to analyze the management of educational inclusion from the perspective of neurodiversity and social heterogeneity. For this, a multiple-case study design was chosen, selecting four educational institutions in the Biobío and Ñuble regions [36, 37]. At the methodological level, the study is based on an interpretive paradigm and an inductive approach, allowing theoretical categories to emerge directly from data analysis [35]. The research involved deep immersion in the study context, applying open, axial, and selective coding to structure findings rigorously. Data interpretation facilitated the construction of a solid theoretical framework that not only complements existing knowledge but also provides new perspectives on educational inclusion [38]. Key units of analysis were identified, consisting of teachers, students, administrators, and parents, selected based on their roles and experiences in inclusion processes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, methodological triangulation was conducted, incorporating various data collection techniques, allowing for a comprehensive analysis from multiple perspectives [39]. Conclusions were drawn from integrating the findings, enabling a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

2.1. Population

The study population was structured into the following groups:

Group 1 (G1): General Education Teachers (GET) and Special Education Teachers (SET) from municipal and subsidized private schools in the Biobío and Ñuble regions with Special Education Programs (PIE).

Group 2 (G2): Students from the selected schools.

Group 3 (G3): School administrators from participating institutions.

Group 4 (G4): Parents of students attending these institutions.

2.2. Sample

3.3 The sample selection was based on homogeneity and saturation criteria, using convenience or purposive sampling [40, 41]. Accessibility and participants' willingness to collaborate were prioritized, ensuring representativeness for the research purposes.

Additionally, a homogeneous sample was employed [40], guaranteeing consistency in participant profiles. Following theoretical saturation criteria [41], the optimal sample size was determined to be 22 individuals, but the final sample included 45 participants. The sample size was determined by saturation criteria due to the qualitative research approach, and evidently the sample is non-representative, which not an issue is given the research focus. Saturation was achieved when participants' arguments were repeated or to verify findings with key informants.

2.3. Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interviews [42]: Interview scripts were designed based on pre-established theoretical categories to minimize bias and optimize the relevance of the questions.

Focus Groups [39]: Sessions were organized to analyze perceptions and experiences, facilitating the exchange of ideas among participants.

Ethnographic Observation [43]: A four-year non-participant longitudinal observation process was implemented, allowing for detailed documentation of interactions and inclusive practices in educational settings.

2.4. Data Validation

Category and Analysis Validation [35]: It was ensured that the identified categories emerged from data analysis and accurately reflected the studied reality.

Informant Confirmation [39]: The representativeness of participants in the focus groups and the accuracy of the interpretation of their statements were verified.

2.5. Analysis Method

Open, Axial, and Selective Coding – Analytical Integration [35, 41]: Data analysis was structured into different coding phases to ensure a systematic and rigorous interpretation.

Integrated Theoretical Analysis: A global interpretation was constructed from the coded data, allowing for the development of a comprehensive theory on educational inclusion and neurodiversity management.

Triangulation [39]: Multiple sources and data collection methods were integrated to strengthen the validity and reliability of the results. Ethical procedures were followed in accordance with the Singapore Statement and the Belmont Report. Informed consent and assent were obtained from all participants, and the study was approved by an accredited ethics committee.

3. RESULTS

Teachers from both general and special education recognize progress toward collaborative work but emphasize that significant challenges remain. They highlight their dependence on individual willingness and persistent difficulties in managing time effectively. Their discourse reveals a lack of clear understanding of inclusion and neurodiversity. When referring to students with special educational needs, their language often reflects pity rather than an inclusive perspective. School administrators generally state that they do everything possible to ensure the success of the integration program, emphasizing that it is functioning well since most students pass their courses. However, their discourse appears more focused on presenting a positive image rather than deeply analyzing actual needs. Furthermore, their perspective does not align with that of the teachers. Parents of students showed reluctance to participate in the study, fearing discussions about homosexuality. This highlights a fundamental misunderstanding of identity and orientation topics. There is a deep-rooted difficulty in comprehending the concept of inclusion. Parents of students in the integration program tend to seek special treatment and assistance rather than inclusive practices. Regarding students, younger children exhibit a highly inclusive perspective. As they grow older, this perspective slightly declines but remains stronger than that of adults. They do not fully understand the theoretical framework of the

integration program but recognize the presence of a teacher who assists some of their peers in the classroom. None of the groups demonstrated familiarity with giftedness or twice-exceptionality. While they acknowledged these students should be considered, they generally assumed that such students do not require support, perceiving them merely as high achievers. Teachers continue to report difficulties with both tools and technological accessibility.

The following excerpts illustrate some of the key challenges identified in the study:

Lack of Understanding of Differences:

"I think students well, it also depends on the teacher and how they present it. Some kids don't see it as a big issue. I had a case in fifth grade where students would say, 'Every time this happens, we just have to put up with it because that's how he is.' I asked the teacher to work more on inclusion with the individual because it's not about enduring someone's differences—it's about understanding and integrating them. That day was a specific case, but in general, I don't know, right?"

Technology Accessibility Challenges:

"We have a basic problem—we don't have internet access. What we use comes from cell phone data. There are two modems, but they are in the offices. There's a computer lab, but it only has about 20 computers, while our classes have over 30 students. We try, we make an effort, but teachers mostly rely on projectors. There are smart boards, but they aren't used because there's still a lack of access."

Time Management as a Key Barrier to Collaborative Work:

"Regarding time, there have been some improvements, but it's still not enough to make the work ideal. I was reading about lesson study in Japan, where they have much more structured and extended reflection periods. They dedicate time for reflection, but also for classroom implementation. That's where the gap lies."

Collaboration as an Individual Effort:

"That's where the issue is—non-teaching hours are supposed to be for the integration program, but then it starts getting complicated. Here, it happens that they tell us, 'Your inclusion hours are for collaborative work and team meetings,' but in the end, those hours are individually managed rather than truly collaborative."

Table 1: Summary of Saturated and Represented Data: This Table Shows an Example of the Coding Process.

Group	Codes 1	Codes 2
Teachers	The special education teacher is an assistant. Collaboration means helping. Work is mostly individual. Lack of training. Parents don't provide enough support. Lack of time. Administrators do not allocate sufficient time. Gifted students are simply high achievers. Priority is given to students with special needs. Attention to diversity is necessary	Inclusion means integration
Administrators	We do everything we're supposed to. Inclusion is not my area of expertise. The team has full support. There are adequate spaces for inclusion. We assist those in need. Inclusion is important	Everything is functioning well
Parents	Inclusion means integration. As long as it doesn't affect my child. The school has resources. Inclusion is a trend	Integrated students need support
Students	Inclusion is necessary. Everyone is my friend. Teachers help. Support is given to those who struggle	Acceptance

4. DISCUSSION

This study analysed the representations and experiences of teachers, administrators, parents, and students regarding collaborative work and educational inclusion, with a particular emphasis on understanding neurodiversity and neurodivergence. Through a grounded theory approach, both recurring patterns and significant differences were identified, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities within current educational practices.

Special education teachers (SED) perceive themselves and are perceived as key actors in supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) or neurodivergent students. However, this perception does not always translate into effective co-teaching practices, which, despite being recognized as essential for inclusion [44], continue to operate at basic levels of support and assistance [25]. While some progress has been made in implementing collaborative work, difficulties related to role distribution and time management persist, directly impacting the effectiveness of these strategies. Teachers continue to refer to "collaborative work," which presents a theoretical and conceptual inconsistency work is either collaborative or individual, but not both. One of the most frequently mentioned challenges by teachers is the lack of time for collaborative work, a structural issue attributed to inefficient administration and the failure to comply with time regulations established by educational legislation [3]. To address these limitations, many teachers rely on informal strategies such as communication through instant messaging apps and email [45]. However, this dependence on informal channels can create an additional burden,

making it difficult to separate work time from personal time. From the administrators' perspective, there is a visible effort to maintain school integration programs operational. However, their approach tends to prioritize administrative outcomes over the quality of inclusive processes. Their discourse emphasizes that inclusion is functioning correctly, mainly based on the number of students progressing to the next grade level. However, this focus on numerical results reveals a disconnect from the everyday realities of teachers and the actual needs of students [3]. On the other hand, parents often struggle to grasp the true scope of educational inclusion. Some, particularly those with children in integration programs, expect differentiated and personalized attention, which can sometimes conflict with the principles of educational equity. Additionally, an initial reluctance to participate in the study was observed, stemming from confusion between inclusion and debates surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation. This highlights a profound misunderstanding of the concept of inclusion [9]. Students generally exhibit a more open and natural perception of diversity at early educational levels, although this trend tends to decline with age. Overall, they recognize the presence of support teachers in the classroom but do not always understand the specific purpose of integration programs. Furthermore, both students and teachers lack a solid understanding of giftedness and twice-exceptionality, reinforcing stereotypes that associate these students exclusively with high academic performance and an absence of support needs [14, 3]. Another emerging factor is the gap in technological accessibility. The lack of adequate infrastructure, combined with insufficient teacher training in digital tools, significantly limits the potential use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the classroom [46]. This issue is particularly evident in contexts where connectivity is inadequate and available tools are not effectively utilized. As some teachers pointed out, reliance on personal devices and the limited use of digital whiteboards highlight persistent structural barriers to technological integration in education. Finally, time management remains a central obstacle to collaborative work. Although some teachers acknowledge improvements in the availability of planning spaces, these remain insufficient compared to educational models like Japan's, where formal periods are dedicated to reflection and pedagogical practice analysis. In this regard, time management in the Chilean context continues to rely on individual solutions and each teacher's ability to organize their

work in an improvised manner [5]. While progress has been made in implementing collaborative work and educational inclusion, the findings of this study highlight the need for structural changes to address current barriers. These include better time allocation for collaborative planning, stronger training in inclusion and ICT, and a more critical approach from administrators in evaluating the effectiveness of integration programs. Looking ahead, it is essential to deepen strategies that foster a paradigm shift in the understanding of neurodiversity and twice-exceptionality, promoting more equitable and effective inclusive practices.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has provided an analysis of educational inclusion management from the perspective of neurodiversity, considering the viewpoints of teachers, students, administrators, and parents. Through the qualitative approach adopted, the goal was not to generalize findings but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of how these stakeholders perceive and interact with inclusion processes in their educational communities. The results indicate that while efforts are being made to move toward more inclusive education, significant challenges persist in inclusion management. Among these, the need for greater collaboration among all educational stakeholders stands out as crucial for overcoming structural and cultural barriers, avoiding a purely assistance-based view of inclusion. The role of educational leaders is highlighted as key in fostering a culture of collaborative work, ensuring access to adequate resources, and providing continuous teacher training in inclusive strategies and assistive technologies. One of the central findings of this study is the importance of rethinking teacher training—both at the initial and ongoing levels to equip educators with pedagogical and technological tools that enable them to effectively address classroom diversity. Inclusion must be understood broadly, not merely as a compensatory strategy for individuals with disabilities but as a fundamental right encompassing cultural, gender, migration, identity, and giftedness aspects, among others. Despite some initial limitations, such as resistance from some teachers to being observed and weather-related challenges affecting the research schedule in southern Chile, the investigative process facilitated trust-building and a deeper analysis of inclusive management in educational institutions. Looking forward, this study lays the foundation for future research that expands the analysis to other regions of Chile and even other countries,

considering different sociocultural contexts. Moreover, it is part of a broader longitudinal study funded by FONDECYT, which aims to contribute to the development of inclusive public policies. In this regard, a new research line has been proposed, focusing on higher education to understand inclusion processes at this level and contribute to the construction of more equitable and diverse educational environments. Ultimately, advancing toward inclusive education in the 21st century requires a collective and sustained commitment to transforming pedagogical practices and ensuring that diversity is valued as a strength rather than perceived as an obstacle.

Table 2: Findings and Potential Improvements.

Findings	Contributions and Implications for the Educational Institution
Improve time management. Strengthen teacher training in inclusion and collaborative work. Enhance training in technology. Conceptualize inclusion from a comprehensive approach	Contributes to improved planning and teacher satisfaction in the inclusion process. Based on the findings, it would help teachers enhance their professional practice and foster collaboration from a professional and horizontal perspective. Teachers can develop better virtual collaborative work and apply alternative inclusive techniques. This supports progress toward a more inclusive approach that moves beyond merely addressing needs and deficits.

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