Inclusive School Leadership in the Context of the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Law: The Case of Chile

René Valdés[1], Catalina Coronado[1], Camila Chávez[2], José Manuel Améstica[3]

[1] Universidad Andrés Bello, Chile
[2] Colegio Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes, Chile
[3] Universidad Diego Portales and Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Chile

ABSTRACT:

The inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) entails both pedagogical and organizational transformation. Within this process, school leadership plays a crucial role, although it has been scarcely examined in research. This study aimed to analyze inclusive leadership practices in the context of the ASD Law in Chilean schools, adopting a qualitative approach based on six case studies conducted over seven months, including 43 interviews and 34 focus groups. Findings indicate that school leadership teams have taken an active role, designing protocols to address episodes of emotional dysregulation and fostering collaborative work with families and multidisciplinary teams. However, significant tensions emerged, such as work overload and conflicts concerning individual rights, particularly in the interactions between students with ASD, their peers, and teachers. These dynamics highlight organizational dilemmas regarding how difference and inclusion are understood and enacted within schools. The study concludes that inclusive leadership should be understood primarily as a sociocultural and ethical process, rather than as a merely instrumental response to policy. In this sense, the ASD Law may serve as an opportunity to reconfigure school culture, challenge exclusionary practices, and promote forms of inclusion more closely aligned with the principles of equity and educational justice.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Autism, School Leadership, Public Policy

INTRODUCTION

Since the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and, more recently, the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), inclusive education has been positioned as a global priority aimed at eliminating all forms of school exclusion and fostering heterogeneous environments that guarantee the participation and progress of all students (Ainscow, 2020; Véliz Jorquera et al., 2020). Despite these commitments, exclusionary practices persist, particularly affecting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who encounter pedagogical, cultural, and social barriers that limit their participation in schools (Stevens, 2022; Wood & Happé, 2020; Stack et al., 2021; Šilc et al., 2024). International reports emphasize that children with ASD continue to face stigma, marginalization, and reduced opportunities for meaningful learning and social interaction (UNESCO, 2020; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2020).

The global rise in ASD diagnoses has increased the demand for educational systems to adopt appropriate and context-sensitive strategies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), approximately one in 100 children worldwide is diagnosed with ASD, although prevalence varies depending on diagnostic criteria, awareness, and the robustness of health and education systems (Van Kessel et al., 2020). In Latin America, data remain fragmented. In Chile, Yáñez et al. (2021) estimated a prevalence of 1.96% among the urban child population, while the Ministry of Education reported that by 2023, over 63,000 students with an ASD diagnosis (1.73%) were enrolled in School Integration Programs.

Recent surveys of caregivers have confirmed persistent barriers to access to education and health services, high levels of stigma, and a general perception of inadequate institutional support (García et al., 2022). These findings underscore the need to advance inclusive approaches that extend beyond individualized support to encompass cultural and institutional transformations (Herrera-Paredes et al., 2024). The heterogeneity of the autism spectrum further complicates educational responses, as students may present diverse intellectual, communicative, and sensory profiles, sometimes alongside dual exceptionality such as ADHD or high cognitive abilities (WHO, 2022; APA, 2022). Consequently, schools must not only address specific learning needs but also challenge the social construction of ASD, which often reinforces deficit-oriented views and exclusionary practices (Palacios et al., 2025).

Within this scenario, school leadership emerges as a critical factor in building inclusive school cultures. Research highlights that inclusive leadership entails shared responsibility, commitment to diversity, promotion of social justice, and the development of democratic practices (Ryan, 2016; Ruairc et al., 2013). Empirical studies demonstrate that effective, distributed, and value-driven leadership can lead to significant transformations in schools (Thompson & Matkin, 2020; Améstica-Abarca, 2023; Pozo et al., 2024).

In Chile, leadership is particularly relevant given that principals often act as mediators and "translators" of inclusion policies within local contexts (Inostroza & Pávez, 2024). However, previous work suggests that school leaders frequently face tensions between administrative compliance and cultural change (Jiménez & Valdés, 2021; Parrilla, 2021; Herrera-Seda et al., 2021). Despite the growing international interest in inclusive leadership, research specifically addressing leadership practices related to students with ASD remains scarce. Available evidence tends to focus on classroom interventions or teacher training (Bautista & Rayón, 2021; Parrilla, 2021), but less is known about how leadership teams shape institutional conditions that support or constrain inclusion for this group (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022). In the Chilean context, the recent enactment of Law 21.545 (ASD Law, hereafter referred to as *Ley TEA* in Spanish) represents a landmark in guaranteeing the educational rights of students with ASD.

Nevertheless, critical analyses reveal tensions between the law's intentions and the realities of its implementation, often marked by bureaucratic and procedural logics (Carreño et al., 2024). This study aims to address these gaps by examining how school leadership teams in Chilean schools implement inclusive leadership practices within the context of the ASD Law's implementation. By doing so, it contributes to bridging the limited evidence on leadership and ASD, while offering insights into how policies are translated into inclusive cultures and practices within schools.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Chile has demonstrated a sustained commitment to inclusive education through a robust legal framework that aims to ensure the right to education for all students. This commitment is reflected in key legislative measures such as the Inclusive Education Law (Law No. 20.845, 2015), which aims to provide a more equitable and inclusive educational system by eliminating profit in schooling, abolishing school selection, and promoting progressive free access to education. Complementary regulations fur-

ther reinforce this framework, including Decree No. 83 (2015), which established curricular adaptation criteria; Decree No. 67 (2018), which ensured school retention; and Decree No. 170 (2009), which regulated the identification of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), explicitly including ASD as a condition subject to specialized support (Zenteno-Osorio et al., 2022). For a broader and more specific understanding of the national context and its inclusive education policies, the critical analyses by Manghi et al. (2020), Valdés (2023), Haddad Escuti (2022), and Chávez et al. (2024) can be consulted, as they highlight both the discursive complexity and the challenges associated with implementation processes.

Despite these advances, the regulatory framework lacked a specialized approach to autism—an omission that began to be addressed with the enactment of Law No. 21.545, known as the ASD Law (Law No. 21.545). This law promoted an intersectoral approach to inclusion and was further reinforced in 2024 through Circular No. 586, which mandated that every school should provide an individualized support plan for each student diagnosed with ASD.

Despite its importance, no empirical studies have examined the implementation of this law within Chilean schools. Therefore, this study documents the actions of school leadership teams through six case studies conducted over a period of seven months. This is particularly relevant given that the implementation of inclusive policies depends not only on technical frameworks but also on broader social, cultural, and economic factors (Ball, 1989), in which school leadership emerges as a key mediating force (Ryan, 2016).

METHODS

This study is part of a larger research project (11230XXX, 2023–2026) on inclusive leadership in school contexts. Law No. 21.545 (ASD Law) emerged as a key topic due to its recent implementation and the significant challenges it poses from practitioners' perspectives. Grounded in an interpretive framework, the study employs a qualitative design, specifically a multiple case study approach, as this allows for an in-depth exploration of how inclusive leadership is enacted and negotiated in diverse institutional settings. A qualitative design is particularly suitable given our aim to capture the meanings, practices, and tensions that shape leadership in everyday school life—dimensions that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. The multiple case study method (Flick, 2015; Patton, 2002) enhances this

design by allowing for comparisons across schools with varying contexts, thereby illuminating both common patterns and contextual specificities. Schools are treated as empirical models through which leadership practices can be analyzed in situ, providing a nuanced understanding of the ways inclusion is constructed, challenged, and sustained within different organizational and cultural dynamics.

Participants

Case selection was carried out using purposive sampling, as proposed by Flick (2015), which enables the deliberate identification of contexts with high potential for in-depth analysis of a specific phenomenon. In this study, six schools located in three different regions of Chile were selected (see Table 1). Inclusion criteria included: (1) inclusive education had to be a core feature of the school's institutional educational project; (2) schools had to be tuition-free and not employ any form of student selection; and (3) school leadership had to be explicitly oriented towards inclusion. To evaluate the latter criterion, the *Leading Inclusive Education in Compulsory Schooling* instrument (LEI-Q) was applied to a total of 52 schools. This instrument—validated and applied from the perspective of families and teaching teams (Author, 2025)—assesses inclusive leadership through four key dimensions: (1) openness to the community; (2) the school as an inclusive space; (3) management of teaching-learning processes and professional development; and (4) the school as a professional community. Each dimension is scored on a scale from 1 ("not implemented") to 4 ("fully implemented"). For this study, schools scoring above 2.5 were considered to demonstrate a substantial level of inclusive leadership (range 2.5–3.49), corresponding to a consolidated though not yet complete implementation. According to the results of the instrument, the six selected schools obtained scores ranging from 2.62 to 3.29, which indicates a significant presence of inclusive practices in school management, albeit with variation across dimensions (Valdés et al., 2025). This explicit definition ensured that the purposive sampling process identified schools with sufficient levels of inclusive leadership to justify an in-depth case analysis. The six selected schools achieved high scores on the scale, which ranged from 1 to 4.

The six schools studied share a strong inclusive orientation in both their educational projects and leadership teams, although they present particularities in terms of size, trajectory, and leadership styles. School 1, with a mixed team led by a principal in her fourth

Table 1. **Characteristics of the Participating Schools**

School	LEI-Q Score	Location	School Level	Enrollment
1	2.80	Metropolitan Region	Primary Education	360
2	3.04	Valparaíso Region	Primary Education	234
3	2.62	Valparaíso Region	Primary Education	459
4	2.92	Valparaíso Region	Primary Education	456
5	3.29	Valparaíso Region	Primary Education	132
6	3.11	Biobío Region	Primary Education	200

year, emphasizes inclusion and citizenship in its institutional project; School 2 organizes its management through units for technical-pedagogical coordination, school coexistence, and resource administration, with a mission oriented toward innovation, academic excellence, and community participation; School 3, with a large enrollment and a steady increase in students with ASD, highlights pedagogical leadership with 10 years of continuity, supported by a robust multidisciplinary team and a strong focus on coexistence and inclusion; School 4, with a smaller enrollment and a high proportion of students in integration programs, relies on an extended multidisciplinary staff (social worker, psychologists, speech therapist, occupational therapist) and is recognized for effective communication, delegation, and proactive leadership; School 5, described as familiar due to the strong affective bonds with students, combines distributed leadership with an innovative pedagogical offer centered on chess as an institutional hallmark; finally, School 6, with a principal in place since 2005 and a stable all-female leadership team since 2018, sustains a project oriented toward inclusion and integral education. Taken together, these leadership teams are characterized by their commitment to inclusion, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the pursuit of cultural transformations that transcend a purely technical response to educational policies. A common feature across all schools is that pedagogical leadership rests on female leadership duos (principal and head of UTP), which provides stability and coherence to their educational projects.

A total of 43 in-depth interviews were conducted with members of school leadership teams (principals, heads of curriculum and instruction, inspectors, school climate coordinators, Special Education Program [PIE] coordinators, and school counselors), along with 34 focus groups involving both teaching staff (school leaders and classroom teachers) and non-teaching professionals (school climate teams and PIE staff) from the participating schools. Detailed information can be seen in Table 2. Data production techniques focused on participants' lived experiences concerning the ASD Law, their representations of its premises, and their understandings of their own practices—thus grounding the analysis in the specific contexts in which the law is implemented (Canales, 2006).

Thematic guides were used to structure the data collection and analysis process. Fieldwork was conducted between March and September 2024, involving regular visits to six schools. Interviews and focus groups, each approximately one hour in length, were conducted in designated spaces within the school facilities. Institutional authorizations and informed consent forms—approved by the institutional bioethics committee of the sponsoring university and in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki—were obtained prior to data collection. All participants were fully informed about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded by using pseudonyms for participants and schools, and by removing any identifying details from

Table 2. **Data Collection Techniques by School**

School	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
Interviews	6	7	11	8	6	5
Focus Groups	5	6	6	6	6	5

transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team to ensure the protection of participants' privacy. In addition, the study highlighted the potential benefits for participants by fostering reflective dialogue and promoting the development of inclusive leadership practices within their schools.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic content analysis (Vásquez, 1994), complemented by insights from organizational studies in school settings (Larsson & Lundholm, 2010). This approach was selected because it enables the identification of recurring patterns across cases while also examining how leadership practices are socially and culturally constructed within schools—an essential dimension for understanding inclusive leadership. The analytic process unfolded in four iterative stages: (1) organization of the material, including transcription, anonymization, and initial familiarization with the data; (2) open coding, in which relevant meaning units were identified and systematically coded; (3) thematic categorization, where codes were clustered into broader analytical categories that reflected both the research aims and emergent field insights; and (4) validation of findings, involving cross-checking categories within the research team and confronting interpretations with relevant theory. Meth-

odological rigor was ensured through data source triangulation (interviews and focus groups), researcher reflexivity, and the preparation of school-specific reports. Additionally, in-person feedback sessions with leadership teams allowed participants to collectively validate the findings, thereby enhancing both the credibility and contextual relevance of the analysis.

RESULTS

The following table presents the main findings regarding the actions and tensions experienced by school leadership teams in the context of the recent implementation of the ASD Law in Chilean schools. Two overarching categories were identified: (1) Actions supporting the implementation of the ASD Law and (2) Development of an inclusive school culture. Each category is broken down into subcategories that describe concrete practices led by school leadership teams, as well as emerging tensions that reflect the challenges faced by school actors in the implementation process.

In relation to the first category—actions supporting the implementation of the ASD Law—the analysis identified practices led by school leadership teams in response to new ministerial mandates regarding autism and inclusion. The first subcategory, *formal procedures for inclusion*, shows

Table 3. **Categories and Subcategories Emerging from Content Analysis**

Category	Subcategory	Definition
Actions Supporting the Implementation of the ASD Law	Formal procedures for Inclusion	The leadership team establishes formal procedures to manage inclusive processes by defining concrete protocols to address specific situations involving autistic students.
	Multidisciplinary Collaboration	The leadership team promotes meetings that foster multidisciplinary collaboration as well as school-family partnerships, encouraging joint decision-making.
	Work Overload as a Tension	Teachers and non-teaching staff experience excessive demands on their time and resources as they take on additional tasks and manage multiple responsibilities.
Development of an Inclusive School Culture	Adaptation of the School Environment	Adjustments are made to the physical and social environment to respect students' sensitivities and identify individual abilities, avoiding exclusion and adapting activities to their needs.
	Promotion of Inclusive Values	School leadership promotes inclusive coexistence based on values such as respect and tolerance.
	Rights dilemma as a Tension	A conflict arises between the recognition of autistic students as individuals with rights, and concerns from other school agents about their own physical and mental well-being. This tension is expressed at three levels: first, autistic students are viewed as "difficult cases"; second, as "potential threats"; and third, as part of the broader "dilemma" of inclusion.

how school leaders have developed systematic procedures to address specific situations involving autistic students, in some cases even prior to the enactment of the legislation. As outlined in Circular No. 586 issued by the Ministry of Education, these protocols include identifying dysregulating school factors, developing emotional containment strategies, and designating key individuals responsible for providing emotional and behavioral support.

> *"We also decided to implement a protocol for these students that would clearly define what triggered their dysregulation—something very specific for daily situations—and what helped them to calm down. In those meetings, we also identified their [key] people, their emotional support figures. Later, we developed this protocol for each student on the autism spectrum."* (Head Inspector, School 4)

The above quote illustrates a leadership team that is deeply familiar with its student, implements a highly complex support framework, identifies key actors, and acts based on what is in the best interest of students with ASD. All of these tasks are carried out through collaborative processes.

> *"All the measures we implement from the Special Education Department (DEC) include personalized regulation and emotional containment plans for each child—we have everything formalized in protocols."* (Individual Interview, Head of Curriculum for Lower Primary, School 3)

These statements reveal that the development of Emotional and Behavioral Dysregulation (EBD) protocols facilitates better anticipation and more effective responses to challenging situations, while also acknowledging the specificities of each student on the autism spectrum. Implementing these protocols requires in-depth knowledge of each student, reinforcing the need for a leadership style that not only organizes but also understands student diversity and uniqueness (Traver-Martí et al., 2023; Verheijen-Tiemstra et al., 2024). Within this framework, protocols are not merely administrative tools—they also function as instruments of care and as mechanisms for safeguarding rights.

The second subcategory, *multidisciplinary collaboration*, illustrates how school leadership fosters coordination among teaching staff and supports professionals and families in building collective responses to the challenges of inclusion. Following the previous paragraph, the development of DEC protocols is not conceived as an isolated technical task, but rather as a shared and situated process that integrates multiple perspectives and bodies of knowledge.

> *"One effective strategy that has worked well is that, as the school leadership team (EGE), we meet with tutor teachers and subject teachers, and together we go over each student as a case study—so we create a complete profile for each child."* (Individual Interview, Special Education Program Coordinator, School 5)

The quote illustrates how technical and specialized teams meet regularly to make decisions based on the specific realities of each student with ASD, which promotes the management of professional resources and consolidation of pedagogical strategies. These collaborative spaces reflect a leadership approach that values shared expertise and responsiveness to individual student needs.

> *"In terms of autism inclusion, for example, we've tried to get parents involved as well. We offer them support through talks that the school regularly organizes. We also encourage them to participate in the DEC protocol. Just recently, we had another meeting so they could feel included and hear information directly from the school."* (Focus Group, Leadership Team, School 6)

This quote highlights the role of families as central actors in both the awareness-raising and implementation processes of the DEC protocol. These practices reflect an inclusive leadership approach that conceives decision-making as a collective and reflective exercise (Ryan, 2016). Collaboration extends beyond the teaching staff, involving families as active agents in the inclusion process (Gómez-Hurtado et al., 2021). Such articulation helps share relevant information, reduces barriers, and contributes to creating a school climate that is more receptive to diversity—particularly in situations of emotional or behavioral dysregulation.

While the previous two subcategories illustrate leadership teams that are responsible and committed to organizational, pedagogical, and participatory dimensions, a cross-cutting tension emerges in the findings: *work overload*, which affects all school actors. The immediate implementation of the ASD Law and Circular No. 586—alongside other inclusive policies—has generated a perception of multiple pedagogical and administrative demands, without sufficient resources or time for a gradual adaptation.

> *"The ASD Law—well, I think the law overall, of course, it all sounds wonderful—but what came with Circular 586 went too far in many places. Yes, because it's all theory, and when it comes to implementation… I remember when it first arrived on February 27th—chaos, total chaos—because we were

supposed to return two days later, and the law was published, issued, and expected to be implemented in practice starting March 1st. It was overwhelming. There was no space like, 'Okay, let's give schools three months to adapt.' No." (Individual Interview, Principal, School 3)

According to the account of one principal, a key tension arises from the excessive theorization embedded in the ASD Law and the absence of an adaptation period for schools to adjust to this new regulatory framework. This generates a sense of imposed timelines and new work dynamics, which disrupt existing structures and intensify the pressure on school communities.

"A series of training sessions were held, which included the new regulations being developed under the Inclusive Education Law, so we're all technically trained here. But the thing is, when we got to March, it felt like an avalanche of new procedures—and many of them felt emergent." (Individual Interview, Head Inspector, School 3)

The voices reflected in these quotes reveal a clear gap between the normative intent and the actual conditions for implementation. Work overload not only leads to physical and emotional exhaustion but also threatens the sustainability of inclusive processes, as schools lack the time and human resources necessary to adequately meet the legal requirements (Oyarzún-Maldonado & Cornejo-Chávez, 2023).

Developing an Inclusive School Culture

The second analytical category, *developing an inclusive culture*, encompasses practices aimed at transforming the school environment to promote learning, participation, and overall well-being for all students, with particular emphasis on those on the autism spectrum. The first subcategory pertains to adaptations in *the school environment* and refers to interventions designed to create flexible, safe, and individualized spaces that are responsive to students' specific characteristics.

"I think that, at least since I arrived, what has changed the most is the emphasis on flexibility—flexibility in response to the specific needs of some students, right? And that's how inclusion is validated in our school. Flexibility is offered, and since there are only a few students, this focus on individuality has really been important. We don't approach inclusion in a standardized way; instead, we adapt it to each student's individual needs. I believe it has become a defining feature of the school." (Individual Interview, School Counselor, School 6)

The school counselor's account reflects a contextualized understanding of inclusion, grounded in flexibility and a focus on individual needs. It highlights a non-standardized approach as a defining feature of the institution's response to student diversity.

"So the idea is to have these specific, strategic points—or, sorry, my colleagues, I see them as strategies—to put them in place so that they can guarantee not just targeted support, like for dysregulation, but also support teachers in managing certain classroom dynamics so that the kids can participate and learn, you know? And then we can also carry out quality assessment processes. That's the goal: for them to learn and for us to evaluate whether it's working." (Focus Group, Special Education Team, School 1)

These statements demonstrate the efforts of school communities to adapt physical, pedagogical, and social environments to the needs of autistic students, aligning with the vision of inclusion as a transformative project (Booth & Ainscow, 2015). Curricular flexibility and the presence of in-class support staff enable schools to address key dimensions such as communication, sensory profiles, and executive functioning. In this context, the role of support professionals becomes essential—not only for responding to episodes of emotional or behavioral dysregulation but also for facilitating meaningful learning experiences and appropriate assessments (Gómez-Hurtado et al., 2021). Ultimately, the goal is to create conditions that extend beyond access to ensure participation and progress in learning for students with ASD.

The second subcategory refers to the *promotion of inclusive values* by school leadership teams. This implies consolidating ethical principles that underpin a school culture oriented toward respect, empathy, solidarity, and cooperation (Booth & Ainscow, 2015). These values serve as a guiding framework for everyday practices that strengthen the sense of community—particularly in contexts where students with ASD are openly welcomed and supported.

"Flexibility, empathy. Solidarity. And what do you call it—accompaniment? Not just from adults, but also from peers toward students who face difficulties. What else could it be? I think those are the values that matter. And where are these values lived? At every level, I believe—from teachers to students, between peers, and even among parents." (Focus Group, Special Education Team, School 5)

"I think one of the things you can see most clearly here, in this context, is—I'm not sure how to say it, really—but it's the empathy that supports inclusion."

(Individual Interview, School Climate Coordinator, School 2)

These quotes, drawn from a focus group with a support team and an interview with a school climate coordinator, illustrate that inclusion is grounded in values such as empathy, solidarity, and collaboration. These values are collectively enacted by the entire educational community, strengthening horizontal relationships and fostering a sense of school belonging.

> *"So, these parents become part of the community, and they themselves start saying things like, 'Hey, at that school they really take good care of the kids,' or maybe they'll say, 'they have the patience,' because that's how people without a pedagogical background see it—teachers as simply having more patience with the children. But it's not about patience; it's about safeguarding every child's right to education. We're not doing the parents a favor; we're simply fulfilling our responsibility."* (Individual Interview, Inspector, School 1)

> *"I do believe empathy is present because, even though it's been difficult for teachers due to the episodes of dysregulation and everything, at the end of the day they still say, 'Well, we have to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, because it's not that the student wanted to behave that way, but rather that they couldn't help it or they genuinely collapsed.' […] So yes, I do feel that the value of empathy is evident."* (Individual Interview, Head of Curriculum, School 4)

These voices show that schools have developed a culture that values diversity and fosters relationships based on respectful interactions and mutual understanding (García-Martínez et al., 2023). Empathy, in particular, emerges as a central ethical disposition that enables staff to manage difficult situations without resorting to punitive measures, recognizing the behaviors of autistic students as part of their neurodiversity. These practices were already taking root prior to the implementation of the ASD Law, suggesting that pre-existing institutional culture can serve as a key facilitator for advancing authentic inclusive processes (Booth & Ainscow, 2015).

A particularly relevant finding is the critical tension that school actors identify as a *dilemma between the rights* of autistic students and the rights of teachers and peers. A perception of individual competing rights is perceived between actors, and therefore tension manifests at three levels: first, autistic students are perceived as "difficult cases"; second, as a "threat"; and third, as a "dilemma" inherent to the inclusion process. At the first level, these students are regarded as complex cases, given that both recent legislation and the realities of school life position emotional and behavioral dysregulation as the primary concern. This leads to high demands for emotional support and individualized attention, placing a considerable burden on school staff.

> *"Above all, what we're really seeing now are the students' emotional dysregulations. We have children who suddenly explode, who become frustrated very quickly, and you have to contain them and identify their attachment figures […] and it's deeply emotional work, very exhausting. It's rewarding, but also very draining."* (Individual Interview, Curriculum Coordinator, School 6)

This quote illustrates how the emotional dysregulation of students with ASD is experienced as a challenging situation—one that can even affect the well-being of other members of the school community. The second level of this tension involves the perception of autistic students as a potential *threat*, as some dysregulation episodes may include aggressive behaviors. In this context, efforts to protect the educational rights of autistic students generate friction when they appear to conflict with the safety and well-being of other school actors, including teachers, support staff, and fellow students.

> *"I think we're dealing with a collision here—for example, when a young student hits classmates or school staff […] and because it was a dysregulation episode, nothing can be done. So that's hard to understand. We do understand that these children have their difficulties and everything else, but […] it's still frustrating—especially when other children are involved. We often talk about dysregulation and protecting the student, but in that effort to protect them, they end up hitting us."* (Individual Interview, Head Inspector, School 3)

These experiences reflect the high emotional toll placed on school staff and the tension between protecting students with ASD and safeguarding the overall well-being of the school community. This creates a contradiction with the principles of inclusive education, as a logic of separation begins to emerge—between "them" (students with ASD) and "us" (the rest of the school). At this third level of tension, autistic students come to represent a *dilemma of inclusion*: school teams face difficulties in decision-making when differentiated measures—central to the inclusive approach—conflict with traditional school norms based on uniform sanctions, and are perceived by the broader community as either unjust or overly permissive.

"Yes, I do have my critique, because I feel that in some ways we've gone too far and swung to the other extreme […] As someone who is 'neurotypical,' I feel I have fewer guarantees than someone with a diagnosis. I think we've gone too far—but it was necessary."
(Individual Interview, Principal, School 5)

These quotes highlight the complexity involved in balancing the rights of all school actors within inclusive contexts. The implementation of differentiated protocols for students with ASD may give rise to perceptions of unequal treatment or impunity in cases of aggression—particularly when schools lack the necessary resources and tools to manage such conflicts effectively. This tension underscores the urgent need to strengthen both emotional and professional support—not only for students with ASD, but also for the educational teams who face these situations daily—in order to prevent inclusion from becoming a source of burnout or conflict within the school community.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that inclusive leadership, within the context of educational policy implementation, involves sociocultural complexities that merit critical reflection.

The first point of discussion concerns the various levels involved in the implementation of educational policies and their impact on how diversity and the inclusion of students with ASD are understood. Although the ASD Law promotes an integral approach, its implementation has been largely reduced to the development of protocols to address emotional and behavioral dysregulation. This evidences a shift from broad principles toward standardized, procedural applications that prioritize technical rationality over critical, context-sensitive educational thinking. As noted in recent Chilean analyses, this gap between the spirit of the law and its practical enactment reflects the tension "between intention and reality" (Carreño et al., 2024), and is also linked to broader debates on inclusive policy implementation (Jiménez & Valdés, 2021; Véliz Jorquera et al., 2020). Excessive protocolization, as other studies have warned (López-López et al., 2011; Sisto & Zelaya, 2013), can oversimplify school complexity, encourage deficit views of students, and undermine broader educational goals. Nevertheless, our results show that protocols are not merely technical instruments: when used in conjunction with collaborative professional work, they can also open up new possibilities to reinterpret the law as a tool for building inclusion

and guaranteeing educational and social rights. This dual nature underscores the significance of leadership as a mediating force that extends beyond compliance (Inostroza & Pávez, 2024).

The second discussion focuses on developing an inclusive school culture and the challenges of mobilizing pre-existing belief systems. Results show significant shifts, including greater flexibility toward student diversity and a shift away from individualist approaches in favor of collective perspectives. These findings are consistent with previous evidence that values-driven leadership and professional collaboration promote more profound transformations (Améstica-Abarca, 2023; Pozo et al., 2024). At the same time, this change process requires spaces for collective reflection where teachers can problematize their practices and build shared meanings of inclusion (Herrera-Seda et al., 2021; Parrilla, 2021). Leadership thus plays a critical role in fostering such spaces and in sustaining organizational transformations that address micropolitical tensions and ethical dilemmas. As Capper (2019) and Ryan (2016) emphasize, schools must be understood not only as organizations but also as political and cultural arenas where power and exclusion operate—an understanding that resonates with the challenges reported here.

The third discussion addresses the relationship between policy and inclusive practice. In the Chilean context, policies aimed at system-level transformations coexist with those designed for specific groups, such as the ASD Law. This duality raises a critical question: Should inclusion policies for ASD students be differentiated or integrated into broader inclusion frameworks? The findings suggest that rather than creating new practices, schools often reinforce and make visible existing pedagogical and institutional processes already aligned with an inclusive ethos. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of school cultures in sustaining inclusive practices (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Gómez-Hurtado et al., 2021) and also reflects international debates on how educational systems address autism (Van Kessel et al., 2020; Hummerstone & Parsons, 2020). The law can therefore be seen not as a rupture but as a catalyst that legitimizes inclusive efforts already underway, while also creating expectations of stronger links with families and communities (Herrera-Paredes et al., 2024; García et al., 2022).

The fourth and final discussion concerns how the figure of the student with ASD becomes a point of symbolic tension in building an inclusive school culture. The narratives collected reveal a persistent polarization between a school imagined as "us" and students with ASD as "the

others." This discursive construction, as highlighted by Palacios et al. (2025), reinforces the very distances that inclusion seeks to overcome. Our results illustrate how ASD students are often positioned as requiring containment or regulation, echoing broader critiques of the emergence of the "emotionally dysregulated" subject in Chilean education. These symbolic tensions have concrete consequences: they reproduce stigmas, undermine coexistence, and hinder cultural change. In this context, inclusive leadership requires not only procedural management but also the ability to challenge normalizing discourses and promote ethical reflection. As Améstica-Abarca (2023) and Bautista & Rayón (2021) note, transformative inclusion depends on professional learning processes that foster empathy, critical awareness, and collaborative action. This aligns with our findings that leadership oriented toward equity and justice can provide the organizational and cultural conditions needed for lasting change.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed the practices of school leadership teams in the context of the ASD Law (*Ley TEA* in Spanish) in Chilean schools, based on six qualitative case studies. Findings were organized into two categories: law implementation and the development of an inclusive school culture. Actions such as personalized protocols and collaborative work emerged, alongside tensions like work overload and limited resources. Efforts to adapt environments and promote inclusive values were noted, but a critical tension—the dilemma of rights—arose, highlighting perceived conflicts between the well-being of students with ASD and the broader community. The study also reveals how the figure of the student with ASD is culturally constructed as an "other," emphasizing the symbolic challenges for inclusive leadership, which must go beyond policy to transform school culture.

The findings underscore that inclusive leadership is not limited to the technical implementation of policies, but involves a sociocultural and ethical process that requires sustained cultural change. The ASD Law, although often operationalized through protocols, can serve as a catalyst for strengthening inclusive practices already present in schools and promoting a broader vision of educational justice. This study emphasizes the significance of leadership committed to equity and inclusion as a crucial factor in transforming schools into environments that value diversity and resist exclusionary practices. The implications extend to policymakers, who must ensure that legal frameworks are not reduced to technical compliance, and to school leaders, who are called to foster reflective, collaborative, and justice-oriented practices capable of reshaping institutional cultures.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has certain limitations. It did not include classroom observations or the perspectives of students and families, which could have enriched the analysis of inclusive leadership practices. Future research should incorporate these voices to provide a more comprehensive view of how inclusive leadership is enacted and contested in everyday school life. Furthermore, comparative studies across different educational levels and regions could provide further insight into the structural and cultural conditions that enable or constrain inclusive leadership.

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