"The context required it": Pandemic, teacher agency and inclusion in Chile

"El contexto te lo requiere": Pandemia, agencia docente e inclusión en Chile

Constanza Cárdenas Alarcón iD *
School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom (2805800c@student.gla.ac.uk)
Constanza Herrera-Seda iD
Departamento de Educación, Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Santiago, Chile (constanza.herrera.s@usach.cl)
José Fuentes Sepúlveda iD
Departamento de Ciencias de la Computación, Universidad de Concepción, Concepción, Chile (jfuentess@udec.cl)
Hugo Torres-Contreras iD
Departamento de Educación, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, Chile (htoresco@uchile.cl)
*Autora para correspondencia.

Background

Inclusive education is considered the main educational challenge worldwide. Inclusion is a process of ongoing change that tries to guarantee the presence in common spaces, participation in school activities, and learning following the school subjects. Moreover, conceptually, it is a political project that looks to dismantle exclusion conditions. Consequently, transformation in multiple dimensions of schooling is needed. Nowadays, the role of teachers in inclusive education has received special attention due to their relevance in practicing inclusive principles. In particular, inclusive pedagogy has been developed as an approach in which teachers value diversity, with child-centred teaching highlighting emotional aspects and active methodologies. However, the complexity of uneven social and economic realities in the Global South, as in the Chilean case, hinders moving forward to inclusive education. This supports the idea that inclusion differs in each educational system. With this in mind, questions about how to study teachers' work from an inclusive perspective emerge. Thus, attention to the teacher's conditions regarding curriculum, resources, support systems, and school organisation is necessary. According to this, teacher agency models have been relevant to study teachers' work for inclusion and social justice. In particular, ecological models seem interesting, recognising that past, present, and future dimensions always influence teachers' actions. Although the studies have increased during the past years, the diversity of contexts in the educational system forces us to keep looking for strong evidence. This study was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, making the inclusion aspiration more challenging.

Aims

Understand how the teacher agency for inclusion was developed in a Chilean school.

Method & procedures

This study was carried out at a public school in Santiago of Chile, where nine teachers agreed to participate. This school was selected for the research team because of its inclusive principles. A parallel design was used, combining two approaches represented by two threads. This design sought to understand teachers' actions considering contextual conditions that influenced them. The first one corresponded to a mixed thread. An open online questionary called TRAC (Log for Teacher Reflection on their Agency of Change) was used to capture the data, and a content analysis was done. Four emergent categories were identified with three sub-categories each. Namely, teachers' work (implementation, adaptation, transformation), collective work (information, help, and collaboration), learning design (estándar, adapted, universal), and recognition culture (invisibilization, needs recognition, value recognition). These qualitative data were transformed into quantitative data. From there, epistemic and interaction

networks were developed. The second thread corresponded to a qualitative approach. For that, an online group interview with a semi-structured guideline was used. The interview sought to delve into the conditions during the Pandemic in terms of organisation, decision-making, and community relationships, among others. From interview transcriptions, thematic and phenomenological analysis was performed. Four themes were identified: Challenge, Teaching for all, boat adrift, and collectivism. Finally, a conceptual map was obtained from the integrated analysis.

Results & discussion

The COVID-19 Pandemic challenged teachers to adapt traditional in-person activities to this new educational scenario considering children and young people's needs. They described it as an ongoing process insofar as new requirements emerged, especially in the context of the Pandemic. Moreover, our results suggested that teachers' strategies were developed for all students. The educational resources were available for all considering students' and families' situations. Social problems experienced by families made the emotional dimension a crucial aspect of teaching, emphasizing the force of emotional activities in teachers' work. Therefore, further research into the emotional dimension of teacher agency for inclusion is needed. In terms of organisation, teachers' actions were shaped by informal collective work. Collective spaces were organised by themselves as a response to the lack of guidance from the school authorities base on a relationship of trust. Supporting this result, other studies have shown that teachers were more willing to collaborate during the Pandemic. Additionally, the organisational work and the increased workload generated by distance learning produced burnout and negative consequences in teachers' personal life. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, questioning the support and resources teachers need to develop an inclusive perspective. Methodologically, the design allowed us to study teacher agency from a global but situated perspective. In that sense, this study contributes to understanding teacher agency for inclusion within real settings, recognising all the complexities that different contexts have

Conclusion

The recent COVID-19 Pandemic made the inclusion aspiration even more challenging. In the context of a Chilean school, teachers organised themselves to respond to the situation. Their actions were motivated to provide emotional contention to all students. In particular, a collaboration network emerged, limited mostly to informal communication rather than a well-organised collaboration. This research reinforces that the study of inclusion in education is susceptible to the context, and more effort is needed to fully understand this key challenge.

Keywords: COVID-19, epistemic networks, inclusive practices, teacher collaboration

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