Headteachers' perceptions on the application of inclusive Special Education practices in Early Childhood Education in Peru & Finland

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion is a topic that has been evolving as the years go by, which has been controlled through different tactics or methods. In this context, it's worth noting the important role schools have, particularly that of headteachers, as they have a direct influence on guiding teachers, families, and students. It is because they are the ones in charge of activating and promoting communication in their community by building an accepting culture. Considering the earlier mentioned, this research aims to understand the various viewpoints they hold concerning the application of inclusive techniques inside schools. Namely, this is the main reason why a qualitative study was chosen, which began by interviewing 6 public school headteachers, 3 from Peru and 3 from Finland.

Following a thorough examination of the data using thematic analysis, the outcomes indicate that the definitions of an inclusive space are heterogeneous, varying from area accessibility to materials utilised. Similarly, it was observed that societal emotional requirements had a significant impact on the concept of inclusion. It was also revealed that headteachers faced the challenge of finding tools to inspire community motivation, which aligns with statements indicating that needs extended beyond material aspects and that addressing interpersonal relationships was asked from the headteacher by the community. Taking into consideration the findings, it is essential to think that a headteacher's view on inclusivity needs to be comprehensive and that it doesn't solely revolve around pinpointing specific actions related to the handling of materialistic factors.

Keywords: Inclusion, special education, early childhood education, headteachers, pedagogical leadership.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the educational world has broadened its horizons regarding inclusivity, allowing the students to perform different subjects in school as expected. This is a consequence of different events throughout history that have caused breakthroughs in peoples structure of thought as well as technological advancements. A clear example of one of the movements that modified society's mindset happened in 1975 which was described by Connor (2012) as an evident promotion for equal rights on education for children with disabilities, known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Forwarding to present times, universal access to inclusive education is a right that all children are entitled to, whose implementation starts in Early Childhood Education (ECE) as shown in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which fourth goal pledges to "ensure inclusive and equitable education" (UNESCO, 2021).

Regardless of the previously mentioned, even though this is a topic that is much more talked about, it shouldn't take away from it being a difficult road to get through in order to achieve a more inclusive education and how it is considered "taboo" (Karisa et al., 2020). Because, even though education is a right that every child has, UNESCO (2021) states, due to the pandemic generated by the COVID-19 virus, governments worldwide have gone through rough challenges to provide equal education for all students that lived in different contexts or presented learning difficulties, could not be provided with distance teaching. In other words, a gap that does not allow all children to be able to learn equally prevails to this day.

On the other hand, all the effort put into building a bridge to close the inequality gap has allowed education to create more inclusive spaces and content that allows more children to obtain the education they deserve. Notably, when it comes to special education (SE), there are a plethora of techniques and approaches utilised by professionals in educational settings in an effort to facilitate students with special needs (SN) learning processes. Moreover, as it involves exclusive teaching techniques, not commonly applied with typical performing students, it usually alienates SN children by labelling and designating them to a separate environment with a specialised teacher (Kirk, 1953 & Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997).

For this reason, Pulkkinen et al. (2020) emphasise that "special education can be viewed as a response to the challenges faced by general education" (p. 365). On the other hand, commentary has been made categorising SE as unfair to the SN minority because it portrays them with labels or categories, even sometimes derogatory terms

towards their special conditions. Not only is it considerably more expensive than a traditional educational context but, as this population grows it becomes more difficult to be financed by the government (Cook & Schirmer, 2003; Bolick, 2001; Finn & Rotherham, 2001 & Fisher, 2001).

Remarkably, this points out that inclusivity is a practice that focuses on the individual needs of every child, enabling them to achieve their maximum capabilities while simultaneously removing obstacles (Ferguson, 2008; Haug, 2017 and Thomas, 2013). Nonetheless, even with all the positive aspects and outlooks to eliminate inequality in education, they have not been completely successful because the need for accessibility and inclusivity for people with disabilities still prevails in our community. Hand in hand with the previous statement, Richardson and Powell (2011) argue that at present, inclusion only occurs with children that possess moderate learning difficulties and can be handled within a class group. Truly, this necessity has increased throughout the years, and has essentially become an expectation for educators to know how to attend children's necessities within the classroom space. And, although there are several actors within the Educational Institution (EI), in this research, the perspective of the Early Childhood Education headteachers is considered, since they are the ones who assume the leadership of everything that happens in the schools.

Besides, it must be highlighted that in-class interaction between special needs (SN) and typical students benefits both, fostering welcoming environments and combatting discrimination in effective schools (Beckett, 2009 & Tafa and Manolitsis, 2003). In addition to this, Justice et al. (2014), affirm that a consistent interaction between children with special needs (SN) and typically developing children leads to a notable enhancement in the targeted skill. However, regardless of its benefits, Kirjavainen et al. (2014) disclose that this inclusion mostly occurs with pupils that have mild learning difficulties and when they have severe SN they are taught in a different educational setting. Therefore, inclusion is crucial to meet all children's needs and must begin with school headteachers and their teams. Being that, they guide the institution, aiming for positive student learning outcomes and institutional growth. Evidently, external situations affecting their community will impact the educational institution (Minedu, 2015). Leading members play a vital role in promoting inclusion by analysing internal processes to understand how situations are perceived.

Evidently, education is diverse worldwide, shaped by economic resources and cultural norms in each country. The key question is, how does it function in nations with distinct approaches and varying socio-economic statuses? For instance, consider the comparison between Finland, a developed country celebrated for its educational

achievements, and Peru, a developing nation struggling to excel in educational outcomes. For that reason, the aim of this case study is to closely analyse and recognise the realities, innovations and challenges lived in both studied contexts, ideally leading to information that can be applied not only within the specific environments under consideration but also by others sharing similar organisational characteristics.

1.1. Finnish and Peruvian approach on education

Finland, known for its top-tier educational system, ranks seventh among ninety nations in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), as highlighted by Schleicher (2019). This underscores the government's commitment to delivering quality education, which has proven successful. In contrast, the third world includes countries like Peru, which stands at sixty-fourth place out of ninety in PISA, indicating less effective government strategies in education, prompting the need for improvements within the Ministry of Education (Minedu). These countries exhibit significant disparities in their financial and educational investment approaches. During 2020, the destinations of GDP varied between countries of different socioeconomic status' where Finland allocated 5.9% of its GDP to education in 2020, while Peru allocated only 4.2%. This stark difference sheds light on Peru's comparatively lower investment in children's education (World Bank, 2022 & UNESCO 2020). In the following chapters, we will delve into each country's specific actions and their respective outcomes in recent years.

1.2. Pedagogical leadership

An Educational Institution must be guided by someone who possesses leadership skills, which implies knowing how to mobilise and influence others to implement the institutional plan, improve the quality of education and achieve main school goals (Leithwood and Riehl, 2009). But all this is achieved through good directive and pedagogical leadership, which allows for the ability to create goals and execute them efficiently in the time set in order to obtain good working conditions and avoid creating a bureaucratic model (Robinson et al., 2009, and Valenzuela and Horn, 2012). Moreover, it is important to highlight that, pedagogical leadership, places great emphasis on having educational goals and/or purposes in order to object to educational plans, prepare school documents and monitor all educational personnel to strengthen

leadership as a community (Hallinger, 2005; Ord et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2009). Additionally, culture can be a factor that significantly influences goal-setting, strategies, community interactions, and relationships with authority figures (Espinosa et al., 2014).

That is why, understanding the functions of a directive leader (DL) is essential. These can be resumed into three: (1) respond to institutional needs by integrating and listening, (2) foster inclusive norms and (3) developing future pedagogical leaders (León et al., 2018). Emphasising that this does not define the leadership style that is managed, rather characterises the interaction that the director maintains with his educational team, by guiding them to improvement (Uribe, 2007). For this reason, it is crucial that the headteacher fulfils these functions to indirectly impact the academic success of the students since their learning will not be affected, when looking for solutions to problems that may affect the educational centre. (Leon et al., 2018)

Moreover, regarding Early Childhood Education, it is suggested that pedagogical leadership should amplify how we understand how pedagogy works as a whole, regarding its values and vision of itself (Fonsén and Soukainen, 2020). Besides, it is a combination of not only leadership but also management functions, where headteachers are not only responsible for the institution's success but it is also responsible to encourage teachers to apply it in their classrooms. Notably, the main aim of these actions are to optimise children's progress through their prime years of education (Fonsén and Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019; Heikka, Halttunen, and Waniganayake, 2016 & Heikka et al., 2021).

For example, in Finland as Hujala et al. (2016), alongside Vesalainen et al. (2013), highlight the primary areas of leadership responsibility held by a Headteacher, which encompass pedagogy, helpfulness or attentiveness, vast knowledge, human resources skills and various day-to-day operational tasks. Moreover, the Headteacher plays a pivotal role in shaping the organisation's culture within ECE surroundings. According to EDUFI (2016), this involves the following guidelines: exercising pedagogical leadership, developing ECE programs, evaluating children's learning progress, ensuring favourable working conditions for the employees and nurturing their professional growth.

On the other hand, Peru has their "Marco del buen Desemepeño Directivo", which highlights all the characteristics that come with being a competent and exemplary Headteacher. According to the Peruvian Ministry of Education, these guidelines were created following the bases of its predecessor "Criterios de buenas prácticas de dirección escolar", published in 2012. Evidently, both documents were constructed to call attention to what was needed to be done and required by the authorities in each EI,

aiming to clarify their commitment and disposition from everyone involved. Moreover, it focuses on giving clear instructions on what to do in the majority of situations that could occur in a EI (Minedu, 2012 & Minedu, 2014).

1.3. Research questions

The following questions aimed to serve as a framework for understanding the Headteachers role in the organisation, while guiding the systematic collection and processing of data. This approach allowed flexibility to adapt to the specific context and incorporate input from stakeholders during the data gathering process. The study sought to generate valuable insights for each organization's development and offer broader benefits to other education providers facing similar contextual challenges. To achieve this, three initial research questions were defined.

a.　　What aspects do the headteachers think makes an educational space inclusive?

b.　　What are the challenges that the headteachers face when it comes to applying special education inclusive practices in their educational institutions?

c.　　What are the next steps that a headteacher should take to promote a more inclusive society?

2.　　METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research context

The context of this qualitative case study were 6 public Early Childhood Educational Institutions from two different socio economic contexts in a middle sized city in Finland & Lima, Peru. By developing this investigation, the author's intention is to inform the interested public on how and what educational advancements are taking place in two contexts: a first world country like Finland contrasted to a third world country like Peru.

2.1.1. Finland's Case

In Finland's case, all levels in the educational system promote inclusive education as a highly regarded practice. All children are entitled to receive ECE and around 80% of children avail full-time child care, which is primarily offered through municipal child care centres. These child care programmes include Special Education programmes and can be categorised as centre-based, pre-primary school, or family day care programs (Hujala et al., 2016 & Karila, 2012). Moreover, SE is normally referred to as inclusive education, which seeks for equal opportunities for all students ensuring success in their local school, known as "education for all" (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008). This is because it is mostly applied synchronically with basic education and if the student is having issues on acquiring knowledge, special measures or an Individualised Educational Plan (IEP), known as *HOJKS* (Henkilökohtainen Opetuksen Järjestämistä Koskeva Suunnitelma) activities are created aiming towards a better understanding of the topic (Minedu Finland, 2018).

Equally, when taking into consideration ECE, the status is no different than in other levels offered by the government. The two main aims are to: supply aid in child care for families as near to their homes, having coined a term referred to as "educare" that looks to integrate education, teaching and child care (Hujala, 2010 and Holst & Pihlaja, 2011). In a nutshell, the objective of educare is to foster a favourable self-perception in children, cultivate their ability to express themselves and engage with others, boost their learning capabilities and critical thinking, while upholding their overall well-being (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2004; Pihlaja, 2022 and STAKES, 2004).

Besides, in the past, ECE was governed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, but since 2014, it has come under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture (Hujala et al., 2016). Since the 1990s, many Finnish municipalities have merged smaller daycare units into larger ones. While previously, Headteachers oversaw individual centres and were directly involved in teaching children, today's landscape sees most Headteachers primarily focusing on leadership across a group of centres (Haltunen et al., 2019). For example, Vesalainen, Cleve & Ilves (2013) reported that 60% of Headteachers manage multiple services and units at the municipal level. Nonetheless, there are still those who continue to uphold the conventional practice of combining the roles of headteacher and early childhood educator in a single centre.

As of a around a decade, the special education organisation in Finland set in motion the: three-tiered support system were they would be able to advocate for inclusive approaches applied in the school system for all levels, including ECE, where everyone would be taught under the same roof (Pesonen et al., 2015). Notably, for this support system to thrive, special education teachers (SETs) play a key role in its implementation. There has been a complete restructuring in the system where there is no longer a need to separate the students from their classrooms and a collaboration with other general teachers (GTs) has been set in place (Lakkala et al., 2016; Pihlaja, 2022 and Swanson et al., 2012).

Consequently, this support system is appreciated by GTs and has allowed more cooperation between GTs and SETs by sharing responsibilities, which serves as a technique to promote inclusive education (Lakkala et al., 2016; Saloviita, 2018; Takala and Head, 2017). Furthermore, it allows for a more flexible grouping of students, creating a sense of organisation within the group and allowing open discussion on any sudden changes in plans (Pesonen et al., 2015 and Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012).

2.1.2. Peru's Case

Whereas in Peru, as mentioned and evidenced previously, education is not giving such good results regarding educational performance. Even though, it has been reiterated in many documents that in the Article 13 and 17 of the "Constitución Política del Perú" that education is a right that aims to develop a person as a whole and to do so it must be inclusive as well, being that with this education has to offer: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability (Defensoría del Pueblo (DDP), 2019 & DDP, 2022). Moreover, when they speak about inclusivity, as well as Finland, they focus on the importance and substance of SET to be able to achieve quality education, emphasising that above specialising in a disability, they should focus on the general methodologies that are for example the Universal Design of Learning (Diseño Universal de Aprendizaje, DUA) (DDP, 2019).

Besides, regarding what we know about special education and inclusion applied into the country's educational system, during 1975 there was a big Educational Reform, that aimed to institutionalise the SE modality but nowadays the circumstances for people that possess any type of disability remains vague and unclear. This case occurs because SN citizens are not necessarily registered in the system and only 397 institutions are solely dedicated to them. Despite this, they do offer services from 0 to

20 years of age and pay close attention to Early Intervention Programmes (DDP, 2021). Regardless, inclusion has been a practice that is focused on the intent of closing the gap, but in contrast to Finland, Peruvian society still shows a sceptical attitude towards its application because of many reasons, but the lack of knowledge and awareness of what inclusion implies is the most prevalent one (DDP, 2021).

However, in attempts to close the gap towards inclusion, the government must ensure three aspects: the flexibility of the study program, school management and information and research keep going. This, stemming from the fact that Peru has joined the United Nation (UN), in desire to participate in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda, in order to achieve SDG4: Quality Education by 2030 (DDP, 2019). Consequently, trying to close this gap, during the pandemic, Peruvian Ministry of Education (Minedu) (2022) designed a platform called "Aprendo en Casa" exclusively for children with special needs. The content was specifically made for them, aiming to fulfil their needs and continue with their schooling even while not being able to leave home. However, even though the intent was there the results have not necessarily been the most effective regarding each student's progress.

2.2. Research Method

This research is made from a qualitative perspective, which starts from the realistic point of view that the participants have on their roles as social actors who make known their perspectives, beliefs and opinions about different situations that occur in their environment. These are of subjective nature since they manifest their way of thinking when making decisions and reflecting (Bonilla-Castro & Rodríguez, 1995 and Monje, 2011). For this reason, six headteachers were contacted individually, taking into consideration their location and time of exercise in the Headteacher position.

Along the same lines, data collection and analysis were developed in order to obtain the views of the participants. In this way, the set of interpretations that "build" the reality of the research context is conceived to understand the complexity of a group of people belonging to the studied system (Hernández et al., 2014; Hernández, 2018 & Taylor and Bogdan, 1992). This is where qualitative research plays an important role, since it will allow the researcher to carry out this study, giving optimal results by the recognition of different codes and this way create a more reliable analysis.

This is because a hypothesis is not studied but rather, alongside the main concepts, it is formulated throughout the investigation and premises arise that clarify the information collected. Where there is a necessity of not only being prepared on the topic that will be talked about, but also to have done a previous background check on who the person one will be interviewing is. This will maximise and enrich the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee (Tracy, 2013). In turn, this type of research is quite flexible, since as the study progresses, ideas can be reformulated and adapted to changes (Hernández, 2014 & Quecedo and Castaño, 2002).

2.3. Research participants

The selection of 6 participants who are headteachers of public schools was made. Out of the selection, 3 of them belong to the Metropolitan city of Lima, Peru and the other 3 belong to a middle sized city in Finland, being the 6 of them female. The following criteria were taken into account for the selection of the participants: the geographical space where their educational centres are located being the Metropolitan city of Lima, Peru and Finland, that they are public school providers, and that they currently hold the position of headteacher.

Table 1: Finland & Peru
Data from the Finnish & Peruvian participants of the investigation

Participant	Position	Sex	Academic level in charge	Time in the position	Country of origin
A	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	3.5 years	Finland
B	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	10 years	Finland
C	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	8 months	Finland
X	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	8 years	Peru
Y	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	20 years	Peru
Z	Headteacher	F	Early Childhood	10 years	Peru

Source: Self-elaboration

2.4. Data collection

The information was collected during Autumn 2022 through 1 semi-structured interview with 21 questions (Annex 1) that varied from 45 to 60 minutes for each of the 6 people selected. In turn, the questions had a classification scheme divided into two categories: a) Inclusion in Educational Institutions, focused on knowing the established concept of inclusion that, later, defines the policies and the work system with all the educational community in different situations to raise awareness of its importance and b) Directive leadership and inclusion, aimed at understanding the attitude and vision of the director regarding the work plan and handling of possible challenges presented throughout the development process of inclusive methods.

These topics were chosen based on previous studies and taking as the main criteria the specific objectives to meet the general objective of the investigation. This, in order to have a dynamic and orderly interview to obtain answers in greater detail and a better analysis. What is more, the interviews were done via Zoom in a common language with the participants in order to facilitate communication such as: english with the Finnish participants and spanish with the Peruvian participants.

The semi-structured interview is a technique oriented on identifying the perceptions of headteachers about their application on inclusive special education practices in their institutions. This type of interview was selected because throughout the conversation that is done during this time, the participant does not centre in answering closed ended questions but manages to explain their experiences, ideas or opinions further. The purpose of this is to obtain information and proven knowledge based on the interpretation of the case study (Kvale, 2008).

Likewise, they present an adjustable structure due to the fact that the proposed and elaborated questions have a higher index of adapting to the context that is being studied. This is beneficial, in the sense of offering greater possibilities to motivate the interviewer, clarify terms and reduce formalisms (Díaz et. al., 2013). Furthermore, techniques like probing and interpretation were employed to acquire essential knowledge needed to address the research questions (Tracy 2013). In general terms, this technique is related to the study, since perceptions are based on learning or personal experiences and must be approached conditional to each participant.

2.5. Data analysis

When the information from the interviews was collected in recording format, this content was worked on by examining, selecting and interpreting what was obtained. For this, individual codings were first established and then analysed to systematise the information. First, the transcription of the interview was made to find the reading and review of the responses of the participants based on the categories found in the questionnaire guide (see Annex 1). Secondly, the individual or open coding was carried out by the researcher. Later, an axial coding was carried out considering the categories in common to finally reach a moment in which, with a clear outline of the responses, key quotes were chosen that evidenced what the category indicated.

During the process, for the spanish transcriptions, the answers coded were translated to english so the analysis would go smoothly, always taking into consideration the meaning and intention of the answer. According to some authors, this connection between concept and code makes it possible to establish categories for thoughts and ideas (Charmaz, 2007 and Strauss and Corbin, 2002). Likewise, this allows us to identify, within the interview, the themes or central axes that are coded. (Andréu et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2017; Pauleen et al., 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 2002 and Trinidad, Carrero and Soriano, 2006).

Using this technique allows the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained to reveal common categories and conceptualizations of the participants (Cuesta, 2006; Charmaz, 1990 and Hernández, 2014). All of the above responds to questions about the problem addressed in order to have a better understanding of the natural development of the events to be taken into account during the investigation that the participants interpret (Prigol & Behrens, 2019; Suddaby, 2006 and Trinidad, Carrero & Soriano, 2006). Then, the categories were concluded and the connection between what was sought to be investigated and what was investigated was established. Once this process is finished, the explanation of each of the categories is presented in the Findings and Discussion sections.

2.6. Ethical solutions

Ensuring the interviewee's privacy and anonymity was a fundamental consideration in this research to maintain an impartial relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Public involvement and the importance of their

participation were highlighted. Participants were approached, emphasising the research's significance. Various forms, waivers, and disclosures, including a *research notification* and a p*rivacy notice,* were developed and shared with participants to establish trust and security. Participants were informed that their interview responses would be transcribed and analysed anonymously for research purposes, with data deletion upon the completion of the study. To further ensure trust, they were informed that they would be referred to as Headteacher A, B & C for Finnish institutions and X, Y & Z for Peruvian institutions once their responses were transcribed.

3. FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings that were carried out in the interviews with the six headteachers, will be presented. In the first place, the personal perceptions of the participants about the definitions they have about inclusion are presented. Secondly, an inquiry is made to the involvement that each of the educational communities has had in the plan for inclusivity, in which the thoughts and actions that are held regarding the importance of the use of this plan are mentioned. Thirdly and foremost, perceptions are presented about the headteacher's actions or plans for the future regarding being a more inclusive community.

3.1. Aspects involving inclusive techniques in an educational space

In this section, some personal appreciations of headteachers about what inclusion makes an education inclusive is, have been identified. It is identified that there are different definitions of what inclusion is and that the answers range from the relationship with the characteristics of the physical space to actions related to the actions of headteachers. In all of the quotes it can be evidenced that there are heterogenous answers between some headteachers but a percentage of them do agree on what characterises an inclusive educational space, taking classrooms into consideration.

3.1.1. Open-mindness and acceptance

Headteachers emphasised the importance of being open minded when it comes to teaching approaches directed to children in ECE. Needless to say, in order to be open-minded, one must also be accepting of all qualities in the students that one will be

in contact with. Even though Headteachers came from completely different contexts, they have simultaneously agreed on the previously mentioned ideas. On one hand, **Headteacher A** narrates that "The most important thing is [to have] an open mind, (...) adjust your teaching methods to the children's temperament and their characteristics." This previous quote highlights the importance of the flexibility needed in an ECE context, considering the possibilities of improvement when having the will to adjust. And, on the other hand we have **Headteacher Y** who sees inclusion as the need "(...) to identify and respect the different working rhythms and characteristics (...) knowing that every child is unique and particular." This entails in other words, what both headteachers have come across when thinking about inclusion, one has to be part of a community that is open to be considerate of everyone's needs and knows to what extent the abilities of each one can go to.

3.1.2. Consideration as a part of the regular daycare system

In contrast, we can understand that **Headteacher B**, **Headteacher C**, **Headteacher X** and **Headteacher Z** all share the concept of being considerate when it comes to a human being's necessities, specifically children. To start with, **Headteacher B** describes their school experience with inclusion as "(...) children here are in their nearest daycare centres (...) we don't have any special groups. Every child is included in the groups (...)". This gives us an insight on how a Finnish school system is designed, especially on the attention they put in the vicinity a child should have to their school, both for security and convenience purposes. To complement the previous statement, **Headteacher C**, under a similar light talks about the importance of including the children into their "typical" groups and to:

> (...) always think about what is best for the child, know the child and do everything thinking about all children. (...) we don't have one big classroom in the daycares, we have small rooms also where we can differentiate children (...).

In this context, we can understand that her actions are mainly child-centred, which is a positive view to have towards education and looking out for the best outcome for each student. Leads to having a flexible grouping style of methodology, which tends to be one of the key elements of an inclusive school environment.

Notably, on the other side of the world, we can observe that the opinions are not so far apart. On one side, we have **Headteacher X** who is of the opinion that "(...) the

classroom has to be sensitive to the child 's integration (...) on the teachers behalf (...) there must be a lot of warmth, sensitivity & knowledge".

On the other hand, **Headteacher Z** details that they are "(...) working with sensory educational materials, remodelling spaces for children with disabilities (...) we have educational materials and games, playing areas and workshops for parents." What is more, the idea that they are all manifesting with their message is that there is a necessity to bring the children to more "natural" or "real" environments where they can feel part of the group and live usual experiences.

All of these quotes can be understood as their commitment to creating a comfortable and safe environment for the children that they have under their care. Overall, all of the Headteachers' opinions and thoughts, have a sense of similarity when it comes to being thoughtful of the child's developmental environment.

3.2. Challenges faced by headteachers when applying inclusive practices

On the other hand, in this section there were findings on how involved the headteachers became when it comes to promoting inclusion amongst the community and what challenges became apparent to them when it came the time to promote inclusion. It was noted that there are many challenges that involve the union and incorporation of every member of the institution as well as, desire from the majority of the families to take part into these actions. In this set of answers, we can perceive some heterogeneity as well as a considerable amount of homogeneity in some participants, which makes the findings more surprising than anticipated. The difficulties or challenges mentioned by the participants, have been closer in similarity when it came to their country of origin.

3.2.1. Continuity for the child and shared thinking between teachers

The raised concerns of this group of Headteachers were mostly between "the better way to get a message and thoughts along with the whole staff". For instance, when it came to the Finnish participants: **Headteacher A**, **Headteacher B** & **Headteacher C,** they all shared similarities in the answers they provided, making it understood that their common concern or challenge was to make all of the stuff understand the importance of sharing ideas and creating a common ground on how they

would approach their intervention and interactions with SN children. **Headteacher A** described it as

> (...) continuity is one of the limitations that can break this inclusive thinking. Also, people are different, how to get them to [understand] what you mean or have slightly the same ideas as you.

This perception highlights the fact that if teachers are absent and the child's routine is broken, there is also a substantial chance that the child himself will suffer in their learning performance. Along similar lines, **Headteacher B** points out that her biggest obstacle in being inclusive is "(...) that all my staff can understand SE children or children that need support." which ties in perfectly with the point of view that the **Headteacher A** has, being that teachers have to be able to understand or reach children's different perspectives and/or needs. In this scenario, as expected, every person has their way of understanding another human being and this compromises the actions taken towards someone else. Furthermore, if there is no previous conversation of the methodologies or techniques used to treat and stimulate SN children, there will be a missing or weak link within the school teaching programme. Nevertheless, these needs are more talked about when **Headteacher C** states that what defies her the most is to "(...) give every child what they need, (...) sometimes you can't give them as much as one would like to. (...) know how to divide the attention you have." In other words, by bridging all of these perceptions together, it all comes down to the unease of not being able to think alike enough as their peers and to have the correct tools to fulfil each child's needs.

3.2.2. Non specific curriculum and scarcity of information

Conversely, **Headteacher X**, **Headteacher Y** & **Headteacher Z** from Lima, Peru all share similar ideas or concerns on what kind of difficulties they have faced when having to be inclusive. This common theme roamed along the lines of the lack of specificity in the National Curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, meaning that the information they had was either outdated or not inclusive enough or at all. The first comment to observe is of **Headteacher X** who commented on the Ministry regarding the Curriculum:

(..) they don't give you the specifications or they just say "adapt it" [and] the infrastructure that is sometimes not adapted for inclusive children regarding the access the school has (...).

As it happens, this circumstance and condition that teachers or students are going through will not be beneficial for anyone in the short or long term, as they will be at a complete disadvantage from a decent education. What is more, **Headteacher Y** made a remark on the fact that "(...) there is no curriculum for inclusive education (...) the information we have is very scarce, it is talked about a lot but hasn't been acted upon." Again, we are shown that the deficit of these vital elements is a key contributor to the problem that is faced in the educational sector. Lastly, **Headteacher Z** emphasised on that

(....) we need the strengthening but not of what everyone already knows but of the current tendencies, new information is forming but it is confusing because the Ministry tells us one thing and it isn't really done.

Briefly, all these quotes illustrate the panorama around what is going on in the Metropolitan City of Lima, showcasing the misinformation or lack of it that they have on how to address any situation that involves inclusion.

3.3. The future of inclusivity

Lastly, the questions asked during each interview allowed us to demonstrate the insights of this group of Headteachers about the actions they use to motivate their community to continue spreading information for inclusivity and its essentiality in our community. In the following quotes exemplified there is a portrayal of what desires and thoughts the Headteachers' had in regards to what a future with inclusivity included. Undoubtedly, the answers were heterogeneous in many cases but in some were found to have certain similarities on the aspiration to promote a more accepting and involved society, starting with their own institutions.

3.3.1. Focus on daily actions towards children

To show their positivism on this comprehensive way of thinking, a couple Headteachers commented on their intentions to focus on the smaller details of day to day activities. For instance, **Headteacher A** made remarks on how:

(...) we should slow down our pace on every aspect/level (...) concentrate on these basic things that we do (...) we don't see the big picture when we are concentrated on one specific thing.

Considerably, this viewpoint is really eye opening regarding the importance of taking our lives and actions day by day, and not stress about outcomes planned for months ahead. Not only **Headteachers' C** thoughts fall into the same category but they also make us understand that:

(...) we have to learn about the children and that everyone is important. Show with everyday examples that we treat everyone as equals. (...) helping understand that everyone is different and special.

Truly, this statement portrays an idea of total acceptance of every childs' abilities, which is the ideal case scenario. However, as this idea was given during the future expectations question, it may not be a total reality at the moment.

3.3.2. Increased involvement from parents

On the other hand, **Headteacher B** shared an interesting idea that most likely depicts a possible necessity that is around to this day. Here we can observe the pointing out where "(...) Finnish daycares (DC) aren't too close to the parents so I would like for them to be closer and involved in our DCs & our routines (...) it is very important that the parents are part of the child's normal daily life." This in some way gives us an insiders scope on the reality of what some Finnish ECEC look like and how they are truly executed.

3.3.3. Continue informing and sensitising

Ultimately, all Headteachers from Lima, Peru, shared fairly similar thoughts when it came to spreading the word and expanding the community around inclusion. This idea starts with **Headteacher X**, who stresses the importance of:

(...) never leaving behind the sensitization (...) not only from the teachers but also for families who have an inclusive child (...). The MINEDU and MINSA have to be more realistic on the diagnosis of SE children and prioritise if a school reports them, let them be taken care of quickly.

Foremost, this is a showcasing of the big desire by the public system, where a constant mention of lack of action and information is completely needed. Hand in hand, **Headteacher Y** expresses some ideas regarding her hopes for the future, where she says:

> You have made me think about this plan, that should not only be left in action [but to be registered for the future] and how important it is to have one. (...) observe the characteristics of our student population and from there identify the differences (...).

Notably, a plan of action is greatly needed to be able to act in a timely and efficient manner, increasing the chances of having more cases of success with each child. Pursuing the same desires, **Headteacher Z** tells us that:

> (...) the first step would be to socialise how we have developed these good practices inside the EI with other [educational] networks. (...) these experiences could be shared with other networks or countries of the progress made.

In this matter, there is a big importance in sensitising all the personnel, which are the ones that are gonna take direct contact with the children and ultimately impact their lives.

4. DISCUSSION

As a summary, after having established the results, the following conclusions were identified based on the categories mentioned above.

4.1. Aspects involving inclusive techniques in an educational space

Firstly, participants responded from different perspectives to questions that sought to obtain the established concept of inclusion because it is related to all the plans and/or projects of the institution regarding the development of each child. Being in turn, the framework of attention that they provide to each aspect within the educational level. Some of them mainly approached definitions proposed in documents. Highlighting that inclusivity is where each child's unique needs are addressed and enables them to achieve their full potential while simultaneously dismantling barriers (Ferguson, 2008; Haug, 2017 and Thomas, 2013).

Some also responded in relation to how, in the physical space, actions are established to promote inclusion. It is identified that what is perceived as inclusive practices is mainly associated with EI material actions that range from keeping spaces accessible to generating material for a more inclusive approach. Regardless of this, up until now is limited to children with moderate learning difficulties who can be accommodated within a regular classroom setting (Richardson & Powell, 2011). In line manner, barriers also are shown by adverse attitudes towards these students (Van Mieghem et al., 2020), alongside physical and architectural limitations (Arnaiz, De Haro & Maldonado, 2019), rigid curricula unsuited for diverse learners (Suleymanov, 2015), and insufficient teacher readiness (Shemanov & Ekushevskaya, 2018).

For the headteachers interviewed, the participation of their community is vital for the good development and application of inclusive practices within the institution. Fundamentally, nurturing school-parent relationships enhances the learning community, and collaborative efforts enable children to reach their full learning potential (Olcer & Kocer, 2015; Schussler, 2003). However, they perceive that the capacity for understanding and analysis that each individual has can generate complexity during the process of managing inclusive activities; all this, in turn, is influenced by the internal or external conditions that surround him and that influence his actions. Hence the need for pedagogical leaders that influence, inspire and prepare the community to efficiently fulfil the proposed goals in a healthy work environment (Leithwood and Riehl, 2009, Robinson et al., 2009, and Valenzuela and Horn, 2012).

4.2. Challenges faced by headteachers when applying inclusive practices

Secondly, the interviewees have identified that motivating the community has been one of the most complicated stages, but not impossible to achieve. Within their answers, it is evident that the participants have defined and understood the role that they have and that within this process, it is vital. What is more, as an institutional leader, they have the responsibility of constantly rethinking the programs and support offered by the institution according to the context in which its principles are based and promoting improvement as a team (Heikka y Waniganayake, 2011).

4.2.1. Communication and participation difficulties

In particular, Headteachers have used different methods in which they have sought to keep the members of the institution in communication, either through work tools, the distribution of roles or providing spaces where active listening and exchange of ideas is encouraged. These work strategies have caused each person in the community to develop their leadership skills and be a proactive agent within the institution (Dorczak, 2013 & Longo, 2008). Thus, it was found that despite the difficulties presented throughout the time exercised by the Headteachers, they were willing to change and did everything possible to provide the best experience within their possibilities.

Seeing themselves challenged by complicated situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they chose to modify and create new action plans that would allow them to comply with everything they had previously agreed to within the Institutional Educational Project (IEP), showing their commitment to the community. More about this is talked about by Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and UNESCO (2020) communicating that as a first instance the educational community had to face great challenges that arose during the pandemic where it was shown that they did not have the necessary and adequate resources to meet those demands. That is why the Headteacher had to find and formulate new learning conditions for their community, so that they were prepared when providing follow-up to all involved.

Likewise, in parallel, to a certain extent it was possible to meet the needs presented by teachers and parents who had difficulties in communicating or lacking in participation, where different networks were created in order to maintain a stable connection and to be able to express the concerns raised throughout the year. Namely, the technological times we are in allow easier communication, that grant convenience and efficiency while disclosing information (Zieger & Tan, 2012). However, we must not forget that these tools are not available to everyone, especially in third world countries such as Peru, where some members of the community are unable to use this channel to communicate and opt to do so the traditional way (Graham-Clay, 2005). Regardless of the use of technology, communication is detrimental and essential to human relationships and the lack of it would mean a huge setback in educational progress (Sainz, 1998). Essentially, school-parent relations are what improves a school learning community, working as a team will allow children to meet their maximum learning potential (Olcer & Kocer, 2015 & Schussler, 2003).

4.3. Future of inclusivity

And, in third place, the focus on the daily actions dedicated towards the kids was one of the major points raised. In fact, they were very emphasising when it came to being mindful of their actions and comprehensive with their group of children. Undoubtedly, the spotlight that they put into "seeing the bigger picture" is an important aspect of the methodology they implement. Reforms in the application of Special Education inclusive techniques have been modified in the past few years and a division between full-time and part-time SE was created. Full-time special education involved structured teaching in dedicated classrooms, while part-time programs emphasised cost-efficiency, offering temporary and adaptable education alongside "typically performing" students. (Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), 2010 & Kivirauma and Ruoho, 2007).

As it happens, it has been proven that when "atypical" performing students come into constant contact with "typical" performing children they have a better development of their overall skills (Justice et al., 2014). Stemming from positive or neutral interactions where they can both feel accepted and reduce the possibilities of discrimination (Beckett, 2009 & Tafa & Manolitsis, 2003). However, Kirjavainen et al. (2014) reveal that such inclusion primarily applies to students with mild learning difficulties, with those having severe SN typically educated in separate settings. Usually, for outsiders, Finnish education is portrayed as a "perfect" process that contains and gives all elements needed to educate a child. Whereas, based on the information and details provided by the interviewees, we have been allowed a deeper insight into the reality of what goes on in this public educational system.

Finally, an interesting point was raised, where the impulse to create a bigger community for inclusion was shown. This came with the need to continue informing and sensitising people to certain scenarios or conditions and in consequence create an informed and aware public. Certainly, this concern or desire could have been because of previous research that suggests a lack of clear evidence favouring either inclusive education or segregated schooling for their positive academic outcomes and social advantages, often at the expense of wholehearted dedication to inclusion (House of Commons, 2006 & Lindsay, 2011).

4.4. Limitations

Among the limitations found along the course of this investigation, because this was an interview-based exploration, one of the first limitations based on the longevity of the search to complete an appropriate number of participants for each country, it could be said that the difficulty of *finding willing headteachers* is considered a limitation. The previously indicated is deeply intertwined and rooted with the language barrier limitation, where because of this many headteachers from Finland, were unwilling to participate. On the contrary, Peruvian participants were not faced through this challenge as it was mentioned before, their interviews were conducted in their native language, Spanish.

As it happens, *language barrier* or *language translation* faced between the participant and the investigator could be considered as another limitation. In the case of all of the Finnish participants, because the interviews were conducted in English and not their mother tongue, Finnish, there was a visible difficulty in the interpretation and translation of certain terms on their part. Consequently, this could have possibly led to a much more shortened or concise style of answers, due to the unfamiliarity of some English vocabulary. Regarding the Peruvian participants, because the investigators mother tongue is Spanish, the participants' interviews were done in their native tongue, which in a sense allowed more freedom of expression. This can be evidenced in the length of their answers and the certainty of the terms utilised.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that some future research points were perceived and found inside the responses of the interviewees. For example, it was raised at various times that the role of the Government was extremely relevant to promote inclusive practices by the executive leader. Therefore, it is suggested to continue conducting research after these results, in order to make a contrast of how the perceptions of managers have changed based on their leadership during changing times.

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6. ANNEXES

6.1. Annex 1: Semi-structured interview guide

Questionnaire about the application of inclusive methods in Educational Institutions
Inclusion in Educational Institutions
1. How long have you been a headteacher at this institution?
2. Based on your experience, what are the characteristics of an inclusive classroom?
3. How does a school impact or influence people to be more inclusive in society?
4. What do you believe is the role of the headteacher when it comes to inclusivity in their educational institution's classrooms?
5. When you started your role as a headteacher in this institution, where did inclusivity stand in this school? And, how does it look now?
6. From your perspective, what is the relationship between a correct implementation of inclusion and a quality educational service?
7. From your point of view, which are the most frequent challenges a headteacher faces when implementing inclusive methods in the curriculum?
8. In your institution, do they have a specific plan to attend to children with learning difficulties? If so, what does it consist of?
9. What is your perspective on if this plan is being effective or not inside the classrooms taking into consideration all the necessities?
10. According to your perspective, are the members of your educational community involved in supporting and applying inclusive methods? If so, how?
11. In your experience, what elements are the ones that give you limitations when it comes to being inclusive in your classrooms?
Directive Leadership and Inclusion
12. With your experience, how does a leader motivate his community to be inclusive? How does he manage and promote his leadership to the community members?
13. Do you consider that what is offered or recommended by the government on inclusivity is enough for your institution's leadership? Why?
14. On what is demanded by the government when it comes to the curriculum and inclusion, do you consider that the institution possesses autonomy when it comes to applying this topic?, to what extent?
15. According to you, what has changed in your role as a leader as the years have gone by since you started in this institution?
16. What, according to you, have been the most difficult aspects of leading your school into becoming a more inclusive environment?
17. How did you manage to move over these challenges and succeed?
18. In your institution, do you have a considerable amount of contact with the parents? How is it that they participate in the inclusion inside of the school?
19. Is there a committee in charge of creating the methods used in the classrooms? If so, how do you work hand in hand with them?
20. From your point of view, does this committee really help out when it comes to relieving some workload on your day to day?
21. As a leader, what do you think are the next steps in order to become a more inclusive society, starting with your school?