

Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Social Representations of the Family from the Mothers' Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to elucidate mothers' social representations of inclusive education and examine how these representations facilitate or impede inclusion and exclusion processes in early childhood classrooms. The involvement of mothers is particularly crucial in fostering the inclusion and learning of all children in preschool settings. This study was grounded in an interpretive paradigm and employed a qualitative methodology. The sample comprised 29 participants, specifically mothers of Chilean, Venezuelan, and Colombian nationalities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, each averaging 50 min. The data were systematically processed using a reflective thematic analysis approach, which enabled the identification of patterns of meaning from the qualitative data while preserving the contextual and interpretive complexity of the discourse. NVivo 15 software was used to organize the units of meaning and to facilitate coding. The findings are categorized into four sections: Concepts of Inclusive Education, Facilitators of Inclusion, Obstacles to Inclusion, and the Educational Community, highlighting key aspects of the relationship between family and school. Social representations of inclusion are shaped by parents' experiences, particularly those of mothers, underscoring their role in creating an equitable and participatory school environment for all children.

Keywords: inclusive education, social representations, school, family, educational community

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem

Since its endorsement in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the concept of inclusive Education for All (IE) has evolved towards a more comprehensive definition, diminishing the previous emphasis on disability and aligning more closely with the Education for All initiative (Graham, 2020; Hope & Hall, 2018). The notion of IE entails the reconfiguration of school culture, policies, and practices to effectively address the diversity of children and young people, thereby fostering a transformation in school culture that enables them to achieve their objectives. The perspective of IE, in its entirety, challenges traditional schooling and its focus on the standardization and homogenization of educational processes (Messiou, 2017; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). In this context, one of the most significant challenges confronting countries is bridging the gap between well-intentioned discourse on inclusion and actual educational practice, as evidenced by Amor et al. 's(2019) study.

Inclusive education (IE) encompasses the integration of all children and young people, irrespective of individual differences such as race, ethnicity, disability, gender, sexual orientation, language, and socioeconomic status (Cerna et al., 2021; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Van Mieghem et al., 2020). This conceptualization complicates the notion and opens up additional possibilities for intervention. Consequently, the challenge for schools becomes more substantial and demanding, although it enriches the educational process for the students. Research demonstrates how this concept includes perspectives ranging from those focused on the specific needs of certain students, whether with disabilities or special educational needs, to holistic approaches that advocate for the right to equitable and quality education for all, regardless of personal characteristics. In essence, it transcends the focus on addressing diversity to establish inclusive education as a fundamental right for all (Messiou, 2017; Štemberger & Kiswarday, 2018). Early childhood education lays the foundation for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Studies have indicated that this stage is vital for fostering equitable learning and inclusive social interactions (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014; Zabeli & Gjelij, 2020). Agbenyega and Klibthong (2021) highlighted that educators face obstacles in implementing inclusive methods due to

insufficient training, resources, and a lack of understanding of inclusion. Early childhood education refers to the inclusion of all children in classrooms or groups, regardless of ethnicity, language, religion, cultural or economic status, or any other diversity-related factors. This implies active participation in all the group activities (Zabeli & Gjelač, 2020). Studies on early childhood education indicate that an inclusive approach based on positive attitudes and quality practices can be transformative for children (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2021; Florian, 2015; Saloviita, 2018). Families play an important role in the inclusive implementation of early childhood education in schools. Therefore, their perceptions and understanding of early childhood education are crucial for optimizing teachers' inclusive practices. Recent research on early childhood education (ECE) indicates that family involvement is crucial for promoting the inclusion and learning of all children in preschool classrooms (Guebert, 2023; Karlsudd, 2021). This could include creating support groups for parents and training them to work with their children, recognizing that these efforts can contribute new ideas to schools' efforts to develop more inclusive approaches (Kefallinou et al., 2020; Fuentes et al., 2021). This involves planning, participation, collaborative work among professionals and between professionals and families, and the development of a genuine sense of ownership and teamwork within the educational community.

In alignment with the aforementioned considerations, the processes of inclusion in early childhood, as perceived by families, can be elucidated through the theory of social representations (SR), initially proposed by Moscovici in the 1960s (Moscovici, 1961). Since its inception, numerous scholarly contributions have enhanced the understanding of these representations in academic literature. A social representation pertains to an "object," a term encompassing various entities such as "psychoanalysis," "mental illness," "hunting and nature," "intelligence," "work," "business," and "health and illness" (Carvalho & Arruda, 2008; de Oliveira Chamon et al., 2017). Social representation is conceptualized as an assemblage of information, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes concerning a specific object (Abric, 2001). It constitutes a cognitive structure, integrating multiple components stored in memory and linked to an "object." However, representation transcends mere cognition; it is a socially developed and shared form of knowledge with practical applications that contribute to the formation of a shared reality within a social group (Jodelet, 1989, 2008).

Social representation serves as a form of knowledge aimed at fostering behavior and communication among individuals (Moscovici 1979). This knowledge emerges from lived experiences and the dissemination of information about a social object among members of a specific group. Through these recurrent interactions, individuals store, interpret, complete, and reorganize these representations in diverse ways, contingent on their group's societal position (Nogueira & Di Grillo, 2020).

In this framework, it is pertinent to examine the social representations held by an educational community, particularly families, regarding the concept of inclusive education and its related notions (such as special educational needs, disability, and diversity). The successful implementation of inclusive practices hinges on an understanding of their significance. Several studies have underscored the necessity of exploring the meanings attributed by the educational community to their experiences, as these constructions significantly influence the development of inclusive visions and practices (Abou-Gebran & Trevizan, 2018; Bugueño & Sanhueza, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, this study aimed to delineate families' social representations of the concept of inclusive education and to assess how these representations either facilitate or impede the processes of inclusion and exclusion within the early childhood classroom.

2. Method

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm (de Franco & Solórzano, 2020; Miranda & Ortiz, 2020) employing a qualitative methodology and case study design (Harrison et al., 2017; Priya, 2021). The methodology aims to elucidate the meanings participants attribute to inclusive education, focusing on personal perspectives and contextual experiences within the educational environment. This study aligns with the processual approach to social representations (Moscovici, 1961), which conceptualizes representation as a dynamic contextual framework through which individuals interpret reality. Consequently, the qualitative approach does not seek to generalize findings but rather to explore the social construction of the phenomenon under investigation based on the voices of mothers, who are understood as carriers of representations that shape their perceptions, discourses, and practices regarding inclusive education.

2.1 Context and Participants

The research was conducted in two municipal schools in the province of Talca, Maule Region of Chile. One school is located in an urban area, while the other is in a rural setting, enabling the observation of how social representations of early childhood education (EC) are shaped across diverse geographic, economic, and sociocultural contexts within the same administrative department. Both institutions provided preschool education (kindergarten), exhibited high levels of social vulnerability, as indicated by the Social Registry of Households (CASEN, 2022), and explicitly emphasized EC in their institutional educational projects. Participants were selected through purposive sampling of relevant cases (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), employing the following inclusion criteria for this phase: being the mother of a child enrolled in the second level of preschool and expressing willingness to participate in an individual interview. This approach resulted in

a sample of 29 mothers aged 26–50 years. The educational background of the group was diverse; some participants had incomplete primary education, while others had attained higher education. The sample also included women of Chilean, Venezuelan, and Colombian nationalities, contributing to a significant intercultural dimension of the study. The decision to exclusively engage with mothers was informed by their readiness to participate and their predominant role in providing academic support within the studied contexts, as corroborated by preliminary discussions with educators and school support teams.

2.2 Data Collection Techniques

The data collection instrument employed was a semi-structured interview (Ruslin et al., 2022) aimed at investigating mothers' representations, experiences, and expectations concerning inclusive education. The interview guide was formulated based on social representation theory and the principles of inclusive education and was validated by three experts in qualitative research and early childhood education. A pilot interview conducted in a school not included in the main study facilitated adjustments to the language and the sequencing of questions. The guide comprised 25 open-ended questions categorized into three sections: (a) social representations of inclusive education, (b) perspectives on classroom diversity, and (c) assessment of pedagogical practices. This structure enabled a systematic exploration, transitioning from general concepts to personal experiences and the contextual evaluation of these experiences. The interviews were conducted in a confidential setting within the school premises and had an average duration of 50 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

2.3 Procedures and Ethical Considerations

The Scientific Ethics Committee of the Universidad Católica del Maule approved this study (Registration No. 39/2023), ensuring adherence to Chilean research regulations. Participants were provided with verbal and written explanations of the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, and assurances of confidentiality. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were employed, and all data were securely stored on encrypted devices with restricted access to the data.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using the reflexive thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). This approach facilitates the identification of patterns of meaning within qualitative data while considering the contextual and interpretive complexities inherent in discourse. NVivo 15 software was used to organize the units of meaning and to aid in systematic coding.

The analysis was conducted in three stages, as described below. Initially, the transcripts were reviewed to discern the key themes and emotions. Open coding was implemented by assigning labels to pertinent sections of the text, with categories emerging inductively from the content analysis. Subsequently, axial coding was used to establish connections between categories and subcategories, thereby developing an analytical framework that aligned with the study objectives. The researcher maintained critical reflexivity through regular consultations with the co-authors and analysts who provided alternative perspectives and insights. To enhance credibility, source and researcher triangulation was employed. Concept maps and categorization matrices were used to represent the relationships between the categories and units of meaning. This research elucidates the social representations formed by mothers and their tensions within inclusive early childhood education, offering an understanding from a situated perspective that acknowledges mothers as creators of meaning within inclusive school communities.

3. Results

From a comprehensive perspective, the category of "Family" serves as a pivotal axis connecting the meanings, practices, and tensions associated with inclusive education. The narratives provided by the interviewed mothers enabled us to reconstruct the social representations that define their role as co-responsible participants in the teaching and learning processes. This section examines these representations, organized into four analytical categories: conceptions of inclusive education, facilitators of inclusion, barriers to inclusion, and the role of the educational community in inclusion. Each category elucidates key aspects of the relationship between mothers and educational institutions, underscoring both its potential and limitations in the context of inclusive pedagogy.



Figure 1. Word cloud extracted from the participants' stories

In Figure 1, the words highlighted in orange within the cloud signify their high frequency and relevance in the participants' narratives and are associated with the three dimensions of social representation from a processual perspective. Terms such as "inclusion" and "exclusion" pertain to the informational dimension; "different" and "support" correspond to the attitudinal dimension; and "school" and "classroom" relate to the field of representation. This infographic offers an overview of the results, which are subsequently examined in greater detail in the participants' narratives. The data analysis was structured around four categories: notions of Emotional Intelligence (EI), facilitators of inclusion, barriers to inclusion, and pedagogical practices.

Table 1. Categorization System

Categories	Definition	Subcategories
Barriers to inclusion	They refer to any contextual and/or attitudinal impediment that prevents the participation, presence, and learning of children, regardless of their personal characteristics or those of their families.	Lack of information on inclusive education. Personal characteristics
Educational community	From the perspective of inclusive education, an educational community is an environment in which children, parents, guardians, teachers, and administrators feel a sense of belonging, participate fully in the educational process, and work together to address the diversity of students and their families.	Family diversity Family involvement
Facilitators of inclusion	It refers to the contextual and/or attitudinal aspects that could favor the development of inclusion to improve the quality of learning, considering the individual needs of the children and the participation of their families.	Normal School Collaborative work
Concepts of inclusive education	This refers to the understanding that families, parents, or guardians have about the conceptualization of inclusive education, that is, how they understand and/or perceive it based on their experiences.	Inclusion as a right Inclusion Values-based inclusion

3.1 Category: Barriers to Inclusion

While mothers generally express a favorable view of inclusion, they also identify substantial challenges in their daily lives and interactions with educational institutions. These challenges can be categorized as structural and symbolic barriers to care. Regarding structural barriers, mothers cite economic difficulties, time constraints, and physical fatigue as impediments to their active engagement in the educational process of their children. As one mother stated, "I work all day, I get home very tired, and often I can't check homework or attend meetings, even if I want to" (F4-Sandra). These challenges restrict mothers' participation in formal school activities, as such involvement presupposes a level of resources and time that may not be available to them.

From a symbolic standpoint, tensions emerge between families and the institutional practices. Some mothers perceived that school personnel negatively assessed their parenting styles, language, and lifestyle. This lack of recognition fosters distance and mistrust among the parties. One interviewee remarked, "Sometimes I feel like they look at me strangely because I do not talk like the other mothers, as if they do not trust what I say" (F5-Romina). These experiences create a symbolic barrier that impacts participation and belonging, although not through formal exclusion. Perceived judgment regarding parenting styles or lifestyles is associated with distancing in the relationship with the school; consequently, the child's participation in the classroom is influenced by relational barriers rather than formal exclusion.

Several mothers reported delays or incompleteness in the recommended evaluations for their children, which led to their frustration. "We were told that an evaluation would be requested, but a lot of time has passed without any updates, and in the meantime, my daughter still isn't receiving the necessary support" (F6-Constanza). These obstacles illustrate that inclusion is contingent on the commitment of school stakeholders and the broader material, political, and relational contexts surrounding families.

3.2 Category: Educational Community

The category "Educational Community" elucidates social representations that acknowledge the increasing diversity of family structures and emphasize the significance of their active involvement in school life as fundamental components of inclusive education. The parents interviewed exhibited a comprehensive understanding of evolving family dynamics, underscoring the coexistence of various organizational forms that diverge from traditional models. From their perspective, schools must address this reality inclusively: "Nowadays, family is no longer just a mother and father. There are children who live with their grandmothers, their aunts and uncles, or someone takes care of them for a while... there are families who come from abroad." (F1-Victoria). This recognition is accompanied by a call to culturally integrate these differences into education systems.

The participants also reflected on the importance of teaching children to respect diversity from an early age to prevent stigma and promote equality in the classroom. As one mother articulated: She shouldn't differentiate between classmates who don't have a family like hers." (F2-Rosana). These representations not only challenge the school as a space of inclusion but also underscore the formative role of the family in cultivating attitudes of respect and openness toward people with disabilities. "It all starts with what is taught at home... the family does more than the school can," commented one interviewee (F2-Javiera), reaffirming that the values instilled at home are crucial for inclusive coexistence.

They appreciate institutional measures that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, such as replacing "Father's Day" or "Mother's Day" with "Family Day." This change acknowledges social shifts and prompts reflection on the family: "When we celebrate Family Day, we are also implicitly asking: what constitutes a family? Or, what is a family like today?" (F1-María).

Along with openness to recognizing diversity, parents actively value their participation in school activities, which they consider significant opportunities for integration and strengthening the community as a whole. Participation in events like "games day" or "family day" is considered not only logistical support but also a means to strengthen ties between families, especially those from different cultural backgrounds: "is considered not only logistical support but also a means to strengthen ties between families, especially those from different cultural backgrounds: With the foreign mother... you get together, talk to her, and all that" (F2-Blanca). Through these actions, families not only support educational work but also become active agents in building an inclusive community.

3.3 Category: Facilitators of Inclusion

The mothers emphasized empathy, supportive attitudes, and the professional dedication of educational teams as crucial facilitators of inclusion. The educator's role is central in these narratives, as their function is recognized not only as a teacher but also as an agent who welcomes, understands, and adapts their practices to meet students' needs. One mother illustrated this by stating, "My daughter's aunt is very dedicated. If she sees that the girl does not understand something, she finds another way to explain it; she does not leave her behind" (F3-Macarena).

Mothers value institutional flexibility and appreciate efforts to modify spaces and resources despite limited support. Their trust in schools increases when they observe genuine efforts to include all children in the school community. "It was hard for my son to adapt, but they gave him time, they didn't pressure him... that was important for his progress" (F3-Soledad).

Similarly, mothers recognized the emotional support they received from the educational staff as a facilitator. This connection not only reduces the stress associated with raising a child with special educational needs (SEN) but also allows for effective collaboration between the family and school. "I felt supported, I wasn't judged, they told me we were going to work together, that gave me peace of mind" (F3-María).

Thus, the visibility of their children in common school spaces is experienced as a powerful inclusivity act. Mothers appreciate that their sons and daughters participate in events, activities, and celebrations alongside their classmates rather than in segregated spaces. Although simple, these everyday practices are interpreted by students as concrete expressions of respect and equity.

3.4 Category: Concepts of Inclusive Education

The mothers participating in the study shared a representation of inclusion based on normative and aspirational principles. Inclusion is understood as a fundamental right of children, and its legitimacy appears to be rooted in the idea of social justice. The mothers value the fact that inclusive education allows all students to develop without restrictions, eliminating

the historical barriers that have affected people with disabilities and other conditions of exclusion. One mother expressed it clearly: "I think it's incredibly good that inclusive education is a right of children because it does not limit the child. Before, there were many limitations for children who studied if they had a disability. This allows them to progress without limitations" (F2-Antonia).

Inclusion is considered the responsibility of the state to guarantee the appropriate conditions for its implementation. The mothers acknowledged that schools often lack essential resources. The right to inclusion requires tangible means for its realization beyond mere declarations. Another participant stated, "For me, the State must provide everything necessary so that schools have what children need to thrive, be comfortable, and be able to develop and study, all of this universally" (F2-Valentina).

Furthermore, mothers are aware of the institutional mechanisms available to guarantee this right. Some mothers with more specific knowledge of the school system mentioned formal resources for reporting exclusion situations. "If situations of exclusion are observed, the guardian can file a formal complaint with the school, and if there is no response, they can file it with the superintendent" (F2-Ximena). These statements demonstrate a well-informed understanding of regulatory frameworks and the defense of children's rights. The description of inclusion expresses attitudinal, informational, and normative aspects of family discourse, presenting a vision that acknowledges the system's limitations while supporting equity and transformation.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study are elaborated in the following sections. The primary aim of this research was to elucidate mothers' social representations of inclusive education and examine how these representations either facilitate or impede processes of inclusion and exclusion within early childhood classrooms. In this context, the informational disconnect between families and educational institutions emerges as a fundamental obstacle to the effective implementation of inclusive education, resulting in fragmented and asymmetrical perceptions of its scope and responsibilities. This disconnect tends to reduce inclusion to mere physical integration, thereby undermining the sustainability and pedagogical depth of inclusive classroom practices. Recent studies on inclusive education underscore the pivotal role of maternal involvement in fostering the inclusion and learning of all children in the preschool. This involvement may encompass the establishment of parental support groups and the provision of training for parents to engage with their children, recognizing that such initiatives can offer novel insights into schools' efforts to develop more inclusive pedagogical approaches. Within the category of "barriers to inclusion," mothers reported a deficiency in their understanding of inclusive education. Their narratives revealed the absence of a shared definition, leading to inconsistencies within communities. The lack of knowledge or information among families regarding the scope and limitations of inclusive education constitutes a barrier to its implementation, as the initiatives undertaken by schools require discussion and support at home, as evidenced by Jigyel et al. (2020) and Opoku et al. (2022). Several studies (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Messiou, 2017; Woodcock et al., 2022) suggest that the absence of a shared conceptualization within the community may lead to disparities in characterizing teaching and learning practices in schools. Rodríguez and Gomes (2020) concluded that the challenges and limitations of the school-family relationship appear to originate from families' lack of understanding of the roles of early childhood education professionals within the framework of inclusive education. This study underscores the relationship between the diversity of families attending mainstream educational institutions, which creates conditions for early childhood education professionals to devise effective strategies that involve families in the pursuit of increasingly democratic and inclusive education in the following ways. Silva et al. 's (2020) systematic review concluded that various challenges can be observed in both school and family contexts concerning the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Within the domain of the "educational community," mothers recognize and appreciate the increasing diversity in family structures. The literature identifies the family as one of the primary environments for individual socialization and as a mediator of cultural influence. The relationships formed within this context significantly contribute to an individual's psychosocial development, characterized by emotional bonds among members, whether biologically related or not, who perceive and regard each other as family (Gomes, 2021; Sudario & Moreno, 2022). Family diversity encompasses configurations that extend beyond the traditional model, including families formed by same-sex couples, single mothers, divorced parents, parents with adopted children, and other diverse family types (Baena Vallejo et al., 2020; Choez et al., 2022; Gutiérrez & González, 2021).

According to García-García & Cotrina-García (2023), initiatives have emerged within the educational community that promote change and encourage reflection by enhancing social interactions and family participation in schools. Meza-Rodríguez and Trimiño-Quiala (2020) observed that the connections between schools and families in Mexico remain inadequate, necessitating innovative approaches to increase parental involvement. Parental involvement significantly influences children's academic success and emotional well-being (Saritama et al., 2024). Families can engage in school

meetings and activities, thereby strengthening the connection between school and home in an inclusive manner. Ultimately, the school's efforts to promote respect for and acceptance of family diversity within the educational community through inclusive pedagogical practices convey an implicit message that invites reflection on the social and cultural transformations in contemporary society.

Within the category of "facilitators of inclusion," research indicates that initiatives promoting inclusion typically focus on enhancing the capacity of mainstream schools in local neighborhoods to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse student body (Lins et al., 2024; Urban, 2024). Highly inclusive schools are characterized by welcoming and supportive environments for all students, particularly those with disabilities or facing challenges. This includes an emphasis on monitoring and supporting the progress of all students, as highlighted by Azorín and Ainscow (2020).

Furthermore, the mothers interviewed underscored that attending mainstream schools is a matter of social justice, as it facilitates equal opportunities within educational contexts. The literature suggests that to effectively implement inclusive education, mainstream schools must prioritize creating environments conducive to inclusive learning that recognizes and nurtures the potential of all students, ensuring that they fully benefit from the educational experience (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Florian, 2019; Rogers & Johnson, 2018; Strogilos et al., 2020). In Chile, public policies advocate for the enrollment of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, underscoring the significance of inclusive practices in traditional educational settings. This necessitates a comprehensive strategy that considers both the school's structure and the characteristics of the community (Benavides-Moreno et al., 2021).

Research has demonstrated that social transformations have compelled educational institutions to address inclusion to avert exclusion (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Collaborative work has been shown to be effective in fostering inclusive learning environments in schools. In García-García and Cotrina-García's (2023) study, collaborative work is identified as a supportive action characterized by deliberate relationships among individuals who contribute their academic/professional experience or empirical knowledge to the community, thereby opening new avenues for collaboration among educational stakeholders, families, and schools. Adams et al. (2018) concluded that the success of inclusive classrooms necessitates collaboration between teachers and parents. The diversity and differences of each individual in a collaborative team generate a creative synergy that members cannot achieve individually. In summary, the study's findings suggest that collaborative work between schools and families is more valued and desired by mothers than fully established practices in the municipal schools studied in Chile. In this context, collaboration tends to be instrumental, primarily activated in response to problematic situations rather than as a systematic strategy for educational inclusion.

Within the framework of "notions of inclusive education," participating families underscored that inclusive education constitutes an inalienable right for every child with a disability. From their perspective, this universal right ensures that their children attend a school of their preference. It is crucial to recognize that education is predicated on the acceptance of differences and appreciation of the individual, irrespective of physical or psychological attributes (Clark et al., 2018; Lindner & Schwab, 2020). The right to inclusive education ultimately aims to integrate children into mainstream educational settings (De Beco, 2022). In this context, Silva and Elias (2022), in a study conducted in Minas Gerais, highlighted the challenges parents face in supporting their children through school-related difficulties and serving as supportive resources in their interactions with the school. Teachers reported challenges in the inclusion process and issues in the family-school partnership for addressing diversity. Similarly, Karlsudd's (2021) study in Sweden, which sought to understand preschool staff perspectives on pedagogical factors and approaches that promote diversity and belonging, concluded that when staff allow parents to influence activities, it fosters trust and a positive attitude toward an inclusive preschool. Furthermore, the study revealed that preschool children largely accept differences; thus, empowering them with more influence and confidence promotes an inclusive program that addresses diversity in the classroom. Concerning values, evidence suggests that they tend to be universal and enduring, predicting how individuals respond to dilemmas and/or decisions, influencing behavior, choices, emotions, and will, and are linked to motivation. Therefore, they guide, justify, or explain attitudes, norms, behaviors, and actions as guiding principles (Vázquez et al., 2022). The literature indicates that values-based education fosters tolerance and understanding, transcending political, cultural, and religious differences, and places particular emphasis on upholding human rights, protecting ethnic minorities and the most vulnerable social groups, and conserving the environment (Rosa & Santamaria, 2020; Tornés et al., 2021). Respect and understanding are cultivated when students of diverse abilities and backgrounds engage in play, socialize, learn together, participate collectively in student government, attend the same sporting events and plays, and practice inclusion values (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Swartz et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to elucidate mothers' social representations of inclusive early childhood education and examine how these representations impact the processes of school inclusion and exclusion. A qualitative interpretive design was

employed, utilizing a case study approach in two municipal schools in South-Central Chile. The analysis was structured around four primary categories: notions of inclusive education, facilitators, barriers, and the role of the educational community. This study focused on three dimensions: attitudinal, informational, and representational dimensions. The findings demonstrate that educational inclusion is shaped by families' interpretations and school practices, where supportive environments and institutional recognition serve to bridge the gap between rights and actual inclusion. Through the participants' narratives, a social representation of inclusion emerged from the families' experiences, grounded in attitudinal, informational, and representational dimensions. From an attitudinal perspective, families exhibited positive attitudes toward diversity and a commitment to their children's right to learn in shared environments. Inclusion is perceived as a principle of justice guiding educational actions, as reflected in statements emphasizing the right to learn. The informational dimension revealed a limited understanding of inclusion, often confined to physical integration into mainstream education. Despite broader interpretations involving mutual respect and support needs, families lack information about inclusive teaching methods and policies in practice, highlighting the need for greater guidance from teachers. The representational field comprises images and narratives that position families as active participants in the educational process. Mothers are emotionally engaged but face structural challenges. Inclusion is experienced as a negotiated reality both at home and at school, reinforced by experiences such as interaction with teachers and participation in school activities. Families' social representation of inclusion forms a dynamic network of attitudes, knowledge, and experiences, illustrating inclusion as a collective social construct in which families contribute to creating meaning for an equitable and diverse school environment. The identified symbolic barriers were primarily expressed in the reduction of inclusion to mere physical integration and the asymmetry of knowledge between the family and school, which limits effective participation. These representations, constructed in contexts of vulnerability, strain the discourse of rights by positioning inclusion as a contingent achievement rather than an institutional responsibility. From a theoretical and methodological perspective, the social representation approach demonstrated its relevance in shaping the tensions between the discourse of rights and experiences situated in highly vulnerable educational contexts. The integration of reflective thematic analysis, triangulation, and reflexivity reinforced interpretive credibility and offered a relevant methodological approach for capturing shifts between what is thought, expected, and experienced in the schools. This approach fosters a keen perspective, generating a transition from normative definitions to relational experiences that ultimately promote the real achievement of inclusivity. Finally, the mothers' perspectives reveal the conditions that translate into participation and co-construction with a community that values inclusive education. These approaches should be read as analytical guidelines and situated reflections grounded in the specific experiences of the study rather than as universal prescriptions applicable to other contexts.

5.1 Limitations and Projections

The scope of this study was confined to two public schools and employed a purposive sampling method, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Another notable limitation is the exclusively female sample, reflecting patriarchal contexts in which women predominantly undertake caregiving roles and are associated with early childhood education. Additionally, this study did not include other stakeholders such as teachers and school administrators. These limitations do not invalidate the findings; rather, they necessitate an analysis within a situated and contextualized understanding of inclusive education from the mothers' perspectives. For future research, it is recommended that studies incorporate the perspectives of principals and educators, utilizing mixed methods to further investigate this phenomenon.

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Author contributions

María Francisca Muñoz-Oyarce and Sergio Sepúlveda-Vallejos designed the study and its methodology. Javiera Almonacid-Muñoz contributed to data collection and data curation. Karla Valdebenito contributed to data analysis and interpretation of the findings. María Francisca Muñoz-Oyarce prepared the initial manuscript. Sergio Sepúlveda-Vallejos, Javiera Almonacid-Muñoz, and Karla Valdebenito critically reviewed and revised the manuscript. María Francisca Muñoz-Oyarce and Sergio Sepúlveda-Vallejos contributed equally to the conceptualization and methodological design of this research. All authors have read and approved the final version of this manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data were available.

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