Leading Inclusive Schools in High-Vulnerability Contexts: The Moderating Influence of Professional Experience

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Abstract

Leading inclusive schools in contexts of high social vulnerability involves addressing cultural challenges amid deep structural inequalities. These settings demand a form of school leadership that is sensitive, context-aware, and equity-oriented. This study aimed to analyze the relationship between the School Vulnerability Index and perceptions of inclusive leadership, as well as to examine the moderating role of years of professional experience. Using the LEI-Q instrument, surveys were administered to 928 teaching staff across 47 schools in Chile. The results indicate that perceptions of inclusive leadership vary significantly according to gender, professional role, and level of academic training. Although no direct relationship was found between school vulnerability and inclusive leadership, a negative effect was observed among leaders with greater professional experience, particularly in highly vulnerable contexts. These findings highlight the need to reflect on how accumulated experience interacts with structural conditions, potentially influencing the implementation of leadership practices oriented toward inclusion.

Keywords

Liderar Escuelas Inclusivas en Contextos de Alta Vulnerabilidad: la Influencia Moderadora de la Experiencia Profesional

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Resumen

Liderar escuelas inclusivas en contextos de alta vulnerabilidad social implica enfrentar desafíos culturales en medio de profundas desigualdades estructurales. Estos entornos exigen un tipo de liderazgo escolar sensible, contextualizado y orientado a la equidad. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar la relación entre el Índice de Vulnerabilidad Escolar y las percepciones sobre el liderazgo inclusivo, así como examinar el rol moderador de los años de experiencia profesional. A partir de la aplicación del instrumento LEI-Q, se encuestó a 928 integrantes de equipos docentes en 47 escuelas de Chile. Los resultados muestran que las percepciones sobre liderazgo inclusivo varían significativamente según el género, el rol profesional y el nivel de formación académica. Si bien no se identificó una relación directa entre vulnerabilidad escolar y liderazgo inclusivo, se observó un efecto negativo entre los líderes con mayor experiencia profesional, especialmente en contextos altamente vulnerables. Estos hallazgos invitan a reflexionar sobre cómo la experiencia acumulada interactúa con las condiciones estructurales, pudiendo incidir en la implementación de prácticas de liderazgo orientadas a la inclusión.

Palabras clave

Liderazgo escolar, educación inclusiva, pobreza, vulnerabilidad educativa, equidad.

Introduction

The specialized literature on education identifies a variety of leadership styles that drive change processes in schools, depending on their objectives, approaches, or methodologies (Bush, 2016). However, in recent decades, as a result of educational change promoted by social movements in favor of inclusion, school leadership has begun to consolidate as a key factor in advancing social justice and holistic education within educational institutions.

Several authors have attempted to define what it means to lead inclusive schools (Kugelmas, 2003). Some conceive it as a strategic-situated style that draws on practices from other leadership models (Ryan, 2016), while others focus on organizational dynamics (González, 2008), the personality of principals (Ruairc et al., 2013), the conditions provided by leadership teams (Gómez Hurtado, 2014), the ability to foster an inclusive culture (Valdés, 2018), the critical capacity of leadership (Améstica, 2023), and even the role of special education in schools (Porakari et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, recent literature has managed to systematize a set of practices and characteristics that enable the construction of leadership required for an inclusive school (Améstica, 2024; Thompson & Matkin, 2020; Valdés, 2022). These include: (1) Inclusion is not the sole responsibility of the principal but involves middle and informal leadership roles; (2) All leaders explicitly defend and commit to the values and principles of the inclusive model; (3) A broad view of inclusion is adopted, moving away from deficit-based approaches, linking it to social justice and contextual barriers; (4) The leadership team directly participates in diversity management, promoting curriculum flexibility and respecting the educational trajectories of all students; (5) Leaders foster an inclusive culture that values diversity and creates spaces for dialogue with both internal and external stakeholders; (6) They ensure minimum conditions for participation by families, students, and non-teaching professionals, understanding inclusion as a democratic practice; (7) They reorganize the educational community and promote professional development on issues related to inclusive education; and (8) They promote an inclusive philosophy and a shared language based on respect, social justice, and the community's educational needs.

This understanding of inclusive leadership has enabled significant changes and transformations in schools. According to the few existing theoretical and systematic literature reviews (Améstica, 2024; Thompson & Matkin, 2020; Valdés, 2022), schools that promote inclusive leadership demonstrate a school culture that values diversity and openness to difference; they share a common philosophy of inclusion; they are characterized by their commitment to staff professional development; they promote the emergence of new leaders in education and close collaboration among staff; and they cultivate strong links with families and the community. Furthermore, they strive to improve conditions for inclusion, focusing on the progress of all students and promoting democracy and participation among all members of the school community. They also foster a respectful and harmonious environment.

In this context, school vulnerability—understood as the presence of social, economic, and cultural barriers that affect access to and quality of education—represents a highly complex challenge for educational systems in many countries. This phenomenon includes students who are excluded, living in poverty, belonging to ethnic minorities, or with disabilities, which

requires leadership oriented towards equity and inclusion (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). Thus, it is essential that school leaders, beyond promoting inclusion, develop specific competencies that enable them to ensure that all students, regardless of poverty and vulnerability, have regular and quality educational trajectories (Améstica, 2023).

Despite advances in the literature, there remains a significant gap in understanding inclusive leadership, especially in its implementation in high-poverty schools. Valdés (2022) notes that studies on inclusive leadership practices are limited due to the lack of empirical evidence that allows for the establishment of an action model applicable to all schools. Moreover, while the relationship between school leadership and vulnerability has been explored from the perspective of student achievement and learning, it has received little attention from an inclusive management approach. This makes inclusive leadership a key area of study for understanding how school leaders address the challenges of inclusion in complex contexts (Valdés, 2022; Améstica, 2023; Gómez-Hurtado, 2014).

Educational leadership research in vulnerable contexts has highlighted the critical role that school leaders' profiles play in fostering inclusive and equitable environments. According to DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Esposito et al. (2019), school leadership must be motivating and inclusive in vulnerable settings, encouraging the educational community, and promoting a culture of equity. This type of leadership, rooted in respect and collaboration, aims to create environments where the voices of all community members, including students—often excluded from decision-making processes—are heard and valued (Rodríguez et al., 2023). Similarly, Ross (2023) underscores the importance of adaptive and flexible leadership in complex environments with high vulnerability. This approach enables leaders to address evolving and structural challenges by implementing responses that consider individual needs and contextual factors. Along these lines, Kamin and Donaldson (2024) argue that leaders should receive targeted training in equity, diversity, and inclusion, facilitating effective distribution of responsibilities and deep reflection on educational content and its purpose, thereby promoting the emotional well-being of the entire school community (Olmo-Extremera et al., 2024; López-López et al., 2024). Training in these areas is thus essential for building resilient and genuinely inclusive learning environments.Educational leadership research in vulnerable contexts has highlighted the critical role that school leaders' profiles play in fostering inclusive and equitable environments. According to DeMatthews et al. (2021) and Esposito et al. (2019), school leadership must be motivating and inclusive in vulnerable settings, encouraging the educational community, and promoting a culture of equity. This type of leadership, rooted in respect and collaboration, aims to create environments where the voices of all community members, including students—often excluded from decision-making processes—are heard and valued (Rodríguez et al., 2023). Similarly, Ross (2023) underscores the importance of adaptive and flexible leadership in complex environments with high vulnerability. This approach enables leaders to address evolving and structural challenges by implementing responses that consider individual needs and contextual factors. Along these lines, Kamin and Donaldson (2024) argue that leaders should receive targeted training in equity, diversity, and inclusion, facilitating effective distribution of responsibilities and deep reflection on educational content and its purpose, thereby promoting the emotional well-being of the entire school community (Olmo-Extremera et al., 2024; López-López et al., 2024). Training in these areas is thus essential for building resilient and genuinely inclusive learning environments.

As Ross (2023) suggests, inclusive leadership in high-vulnerability contexts focuses on strengthening school community cohesion in the face of socioeconomic challenges and low academic performance. This transformational, change-oriented leadership propels the educational community toward a shared vision of continuous improvement, fostering a culture of inclusion and addressing students' socio-emotional needs (Valdés, 2022). In this process, collaborative work and creating professional learning communities become essential tools for promoting professional development and continuous learning (Chapman & Harris, 2004). As Tschannen-Moran (2019) indicates, trust is crucial in diverse contexts as it facilitates open communication and reinforces mutual respect. In this regard, Valdés and Pérez (2023) note that inclusive leadership in high-vulnerability areas faces significant structural barriers, such as inequality and resource scarcity. Leaders in these settings must be creative and adopt a critical stance toward structural obstacles, aiming for genuine inclusion within the educational system. Adaptability and a focus on equity are critical to their work, enabling them to implement practices that respond to the specific realities of their school communities.

However, inclusive leadership in high-vulnerability contexts not only involves structural and pedagogical challenges, but also presents a significant emotional burden. School leaders who are consistently exposed to the suffering, adversity, and exclusion experienced by students and families may develop symptoms of what the literature describes as *compassion fatigue*— a form of secondary traumatic stress that affects professionals in caregiving roles (Figley, 2013). While initially studied in mental health and medical contexts, recent evidence shows that compassion fatigue is increasingly prevalent in educators and school staff, particularly those working in socially disadvantaged environments (Ormiston, Nygaard, & Apgar, 2022). This emotional exhaustion, driven by chronic empathic engagement, can negatively affect professional motivation, decision-making, and overall well-being, contributing to what some authors describe as the "hidden costs" of leading for inclusion. Recognizing the impact of compassion fatigue may help explain why, paradoxically, more experienced school leaders do not always report higher levels of inclusive leadership practice: sustained exposure to systemic inequities can erode emotional resources and diminish their capacity to lead transformational change.

From a theoretical framework, Fullan (2014) contends that leadership competencies should focus on interpersonal relationships, pedagogical management, and institutional vision. These elements are fundamental for creating inclusive environments as they foster collaboration and develop a culture of mutual respect. Furthermore, Ainscow (2020) emphasizes that equity in education requires inclusive strategies embedded within the curriculum and the daily practice of teachers, eliminating any barriers that hinder active participation from all students. In alignment with this approach, Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) propose that transformational leaders should inspire their teams toward a shared vision of social justice, driving structural changes that strengthen inclusion.

Regarding the influence of factors such as gender, age, and professional experience on inclusive leadership, evidence remains inconclusive (Valdés, 2022; Hirak et al., 2012). However, some studies have explored this relationship. According to Çevik et al. (2023), inclusive leadership affects organizational environments, mainly when led by women, albeit with lesser impact among young men. Tomova et al. (2024) suggest that as leaders age, those around them tend to perceive them as adopting a passive leadership style. Bush (2022) suggests

that female principals may foster higher levels of collaboration within schools, while Abonyi et al. (2024) find no gender-related differences, consistent with other organizational studies (Githaiga & Kipsoi, 2020; Kalağan & Güzeller, 2010). Gore et al. (2024) report no significant differences across experience levels for years of professional experience, echoing the findings of Sawati et al. (2013), who found no correlation between principals' leadership styles and age, experience, or qualifications. Conversely, the study by Gümüş et al. (2024) reveals significant differences between principals' experience, qualifications, and student academic outcomes. In this context, inclusive leadership helps eliminate discrimination through social identity theory (Randel et al., 2018; Ye et al., 2019). However, outcomes often vary according to geographic regions, contextual elements, and study type (Valdés, 2022).

In conclusion, although there is relevant information regarding the relationship between school leadership and vulnerability, much remains to be explored about how these dynamics unfold in schools with educational projects oriented toward inclusion. In particular, it is essential to investigate the link between inclusive leadership and the characteristics of school leaders in vulnerable contexts—such as gender, age, and professional experience—in order to identify the competencies and leadership styles that promote inclusive management in these settings. This study aims to examine the relationship between the school vulnerability index and principals' inclusive leadership, as well as to analyze how years of professional experience moderate this relationship. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) Is there a significant relationship between the school vulnerability index and inclusive leadership? and (2) How do years of professional experience moderate this relationship in highly vulnerable contexts?

Context

Analyzing the relationship between inclusive leadership and school vulnerability in Chile is essential to understanding the specific challenges faced in these contexts and how leaders' characteristics can effectively address them. Chile, one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (ECLAC, 2022; UNDP, 2022), reflects this segmentation within its educational system, where schools located in highly vulnerable areas often lack the resources and specialized support necessary to adequately serve their students. To identify and classify these contexts, Chile employs the School Vulnerability Index (Índice de Vulnerabilidad Escolar, IVE), an annual measure developed by the National Board of School Aid and Scholarships (JUNAEB). This index estimates each school's level of vulnerability based on variables such as socioeconomic status, health conditions, family environment, and other factors that influence student learning and well-being. The IVE categorizes schools into three levels of vulnerability: high (85% or more of students identified as vulnerable), medium (between 60% and 85%), and low (less than 60%), allowing for targeted allocation of resources and policies to schools with greater needs.

In addition, Chile's market-driven approach to education and high levels of school segregation have received international attention (Bellei, 2015). Although inclusion policies implemented over the past decade have sought to promote a more equitable and high-quality education and to mitigate the effects of neoliberalism, a significant gap remains between the

proposed reforms and the everyday realities of schools—particularly in the most vulnerable contexts. In such settings, inclusive leadership is crucial to respond to a dual demand: achieving effective educational outcomes while creating an inclusive environment that values diversity and fosters participation across the entire school community. Examining the Chilean case from an international perspective offers valuable insights into the role of school leaders in disadvantaged contexts, highlighting how the development of inclusive leadership competencies can help overcome structural barriers and promote a genuinely inclusive education that is both context-sensitive and responsive to local realities.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

The Spanish LEI-Q questionnaire "Leading Inclusive Education in Compulsory Education Institutions" (León et al., 2018), validated in Chile (Valdés et al. 2025), was used, targeting teaching teams and families (table 1). The instrument is composed of four dimensions, two of which are directed at teaching teams (40 items) and the other two at families (26 items). The following table provides further details. The selection of participating schools was based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) being tuition-free institutions, (2) not applying any form of student selection, (3) having an explicit orientation toward inclusive education, and (4) being either primary or secondary schools. Schools such as private fee-paying institutions, special education schools, or early childhood centers were excluded from the study. These criteria were established to ensure consistency with the study's focus on inclusive leadership practices within the context of the regular public and subsidized school system in Chile.

Table 1
Instrument Version and Dimensions

Dimensions	Definition	Items	Target
The school as a community	The leadership team fosters an inclusive culture, promotes participation, addresses diversity, and implements measures to enhance improvement and remove barriers to success and equal opportunities.	1-18	Teaching teams
Management of teaching-learning processes and professional development	The leadership team creates conditions that support the inclusion of all students in teaching-learning processes and undertakes initiatives to build a professional learning community committed to shared values and student diversity.	19-40	Teaching teams
Openness to the community	The leadership team implements initiatives to enhance the school's engagement with the community and the surrounding environment, while	1-14	Families

Dimensions	Definition	Items	Target
	taking measures to remove barriers to success and equal opportunities.		
The school as an inclusive space	The leadership team takes actions to promote participation, address diversity, and prevent and manage conflicts within the institution.	15-26	Families

Source. León et al. (2020) and López-López et al. (2021)

Measures

Inclusive Leadership

For the specific purposes of this study, the version intended for teaching team members (leadership teams, teachers, and non-teaching professionals) was used. In this study's application, the reliability was excellent, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.98 and McDonald's omega of 0.98. Furthermore, the validity of the instrument has been empirically confirmed in the Chilean educational context. A recent validation study conducted with 361 Chilean school principals and leadership teams provided evidence of both content and construct validity (Valdés et al., 2025). Construct validity was supported through confirmatory factor analysis, which confirmed a four-dimensional structure—Ethical and Professional Commitment, Inclusion as a Central Axis, Institutional Transformation, and Co-responsibility—with acceptable fit indices (CFI = .951, TLI = .944, RMSEA = .065, SRMR = .044), indicating a good model fit for the Chilean context. Content validity was also established through expert panel review during the adaptation process. These findings support the credibility and validity of the LEI-Q for measuring inclusive leadership practices in Chilean schools. Finally, the instrument was applied online to the total sample reported earlier. The LEI-Q instrument uses a Likert-type scale with four response options based on the level of implementation of the evaluated practices: (1) not yet implemented (no evidence of the practice); (2) partially implemented (some evidence exists but requires improvement); (3) substantially implemented (ample evidence exists but there is still room for improvement); and (4) fully implemented (ample evidence exists and it is difficult to find ways for further improvement).

According to the instrument, inclusive leadership is an approach encompassing the entire leadership team that aims at developing inclusive values and principles, managing diversity, fostering an inclusive culture, engaging in dialogue with the community in decision-making, ensuring participatory conditions, and reorganizing the educational community. It encompasses four interrelated dimensions: The school as a community, Management of teaching-learning processes and professional development, Openness to the community, and The school as an inclusive space (León et al., 2018; León et al., 2020; López-López et al., 2021).

Vulnerability Index

In Chile, the School Vulnerability Index (Índice de Vulnerabilidad Escolar, IVE) classifies schools based on the socio-economic vulnerability of their students, using ranges that allow for categorizing educational institutions according to the percentage of vulnerable students. The ranges are mainly divided into three categories:

1. High: A school is considered to have a high level of vulnerability when more than 85% of its students are in socio-economically vulnerable conditions.
2. Medium: Schools where between 60% and 85% of students are in socio-economic vulnerability are classified under this range.
3. Low: This category applies to institutions where less than 60% of students are in a situation of vulnerability.

These ranges enable the State to allocate resources more effectively, directing financial support and specific programs to schools that need them the most. The IVE is a key indicator in the implementation of educational policies aimed at equity.

Social–Demographic Variables

The variables considered in this study included gender, age, job position, years of professional experience, and length of employment at the same institution.

Statistical Analyses

The data analysis for this study was conducted using the statistical software SPSS, version 25. To examine differences in the means of continuous variables across categorical groups, Student's t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were applied. These techniques are particularly suitable for identifying whether sociodemographic characteristics—such as gender, job position, or level of academic education—are associated with significant differences in perceptions of inclusive leadership. Subsequently, Pearson correlation analyses were performed with the variables of interest. In addition, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 3.3), developed by Andrew F. Hayes, was used—specifically Model 1 (Hayes & Rockwood, 2020)—to assess the moderating effect of a continuous variable, in this case, years of professional experience, on the relationship between the school vulnerability index and inclusive leadership. This approach is especially useful for modeling complex interactions, as it enables the estimation of confidence intervals that support a more precise interpretation of moderating effects. All tests were two-tailed, and a p-value ≤ 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

To safeguard ethical aspects, informed consents were obtained from all participants through a protocol approved by the bioethics committee of the sponsoring university.

Results

The following table presents the demographic and occupational characteristics of the study participants, as well as their average scores on inclusive leadership, expressed as mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). A comparison between categories is included using statistical tests (t or F) to assess significant differences. Prior to conducting the analyses, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk and Levene's tests, respectively. The results indicated that the data met the necessary criteria for the application of Student's t-tests and ANOVA.

Table 2

Participant Characteristics, Differences of Inclusive Leadership Variables by Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	n (%)	Inclusive Leadership		
		M ± SD	M ± SD	t/F	
Gender	Female	724 (78)	107.19 ± 29.37	3.20*	
	Male	199 (21,4)	113.03 ± 26.90		
	Other	5 (0,5)	107.20 ± 24.87		
Age	18 - 25 years	17 (1.8)	122.05 ± 22.73	1.12	
	26 - 30 years	87 (9.4)	107.20 ± 27.08		
	31 - 35 years	145 (15.6)	109.41 ± 29.05		
	36 - 40 years	149 (16.1)	103.77 ± 27.88		
	41 - 45 years	123 (13.3)	108.57 ± 30.22		
	46 - 50 years	113 (12.2)	109.72 ± 29.70		
	51 - 55 years	89 (9.6)	108 ± 31.02		
	56 - 60 years	114 (12.3)	109.11 ± 28.56		
	More 61 years	91 (9.8)	111 ± 29.38		
Position	Teacher	527 (56.8)	104.82 ± 28.19	6.66***	
	Director	154 (16.6)	114.27 ± 28.20		
	Differential/Psychopedagogue	29 (3.1)	110.37 ± 27.05		
	Education Assistant (4)	218 (23.5)	112.81 ± 30.23		
Academic Training	Basic	54 (5.8)	114.77 ± 30.84	3.56*	
	Medium	108 (11.6)	112.93 ± 33.06		
	Professional	500 (53.9)	108.95 ± 28.22		
	Postgraduate	266 (28.7)	104.37 ± 27.56		

Scoure. p < .05 = *; p < .01 = **; p < .001 = ***

In table 2 the Analysis shows a significant difference by gender was found (t = 3.20, *p* < .05). Male participants reported higher levels of inclusive leadership (M = 113.03, SD = 26.90) compared to female participants (M = 107.19, SD = 29.37). Participants who identified as "other" showed scores similar to women (M = 107.20, SD = 24.87). No statistically significant differences by age group were found (F = 1.12). However, the highest mean score was observed in the 18–25 age group (M = 122.05, SD = 22.73), and the lowest in the 36–40 group (M =

103.77, SD = 27.88). Regarding position within the school, there was a highly significant difference (F = 6.66, $p < .001$). School directors reported the highest inclusive leadership scores (M = 114.27, SD = 28.20), followed by education assistants (M = 112.81, SD = 30.23). Teachers reported the lowest scores (M = 104.82, SD = 28.19). Academic training level was also associated with statistically significant differences (F = 3.56, $p < .05$). Individuals with basic education had the highest average scores (M = 114.77, SD = 30.84), while those with postgraduate degrees reported the lowest (M = 104.37, SD = 27.56). Overall, the results indicate that position and academic training level show the most pronounced differences in perceived inclusive leadership.

These findings may reflect underlying sociocultural dynamics in the perception and practice of inclusive leadership. Gender, for example, could be a key variable, as men tend to report higher levels of inclusive leadership—possibly influenced by an androcentric model of leadership. Women, who are often more aware of structural discrimination in education, may assess leadership practices more critically. Despite the gender differences reaching statistical significance in this sample, further exploration is warranted. As noted by Blackmore (2017), although women make up the majority of the educational workforce, leadership roles have historically been masculinized. It is therefore important to investigate how gender identity—including non-binary perspectives—shapes the perception and enactment of inclusive leadership.

Table 3
Correlation Matrix

Variables	Vulnerability Index	Age	Years of Professional Practice	Years at same School	Inclusive Leadership
Vulnerability Index	1	0.008	-0.104[**]	-0.043	-0.,040
Age	0.008	1	0.,785[**]	0.517[**]	0.017
Years of Professional Practice	-0.104[**]	0.785[**]	1	0592[**]	0.020
Years at same School	-0.043	0.517[**]	0.592[**]	1	-0.002
Inclusive Leadership	-0.040	0.017	0.020	-0.002	1

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlations between the studied variables, as shown in Table 3, reveal several relevant findings. First, the Vulnerability Index does not present a significant relationship with inclusive leadership (r = -0.040), indicating that the level of student vulnerability is not directly associated with inclusive leadership practices in schools. Second, there is a high correlation between age and years of professional experience (r = 0.785, p < 0.01), which was expected, as older age tends to reflect more years of professional practice. Lastly, the number of years teachers have worked at the same school does not show a significant correlation with inclusive

leadership (r = -0.002), suggesting that tenure at the same educational institution does not necessarily influence the adoption of inclusive leadership practices.

Table 4

Interaction Effects between the Vulnerability Index and Years of Professional Experience on Inclusive Leadership

Level of Years of Professional Experience	Coefficient (b)	Standard Error (SE)	t-statistic	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Low (6 years)	1.14	-	0.63	0.526	[-2.40, 4.69]
Mean (14 years)	-1.56	-	-1.14	0.255	[-4.26, 1.13]
High (29 years)	-6.64	-	-2.82	0.005	[-11.25, -2.02]

This analysis examines the moderating role of years of professional experience in the relationship between the Vulnerability Index and inclusive leadership (see Table 4). The results indicate that at low and medium levels of professional experience, the association between the Vulnerability Index and inclusive leadership is not statistically significant ($p > .05$). However, for individuals with high levels of professional experience (29 years), the relationship becomes significantly negative ($b = –6.64$, $p < .01$). This finding suggests that in such cases, higher school vulnerability is associated with lower perceptions of inclusive leadership. One possible explanation is the increasing tension experienced by long-serving school leaders when navigating complex demands in highly vulnerable contexts.

To further illustrate this effect, we examined the interaction using a conditional moderation model. Figure 2 presents the effect of the Vulnerability Index on inclusive leadership across levels of professional experience, controlling for gender and age. The moderation analysis confirms that years of professional practice significantly influence this relationship. Specifically, the effect of the Vulnerability Index on inclusive leadership is not significant at low ($b = 1.1441$, $p = .5262$) and medium levels of experience ($b = –1.5627$, $p = .2553$), but becomes significantly negative at high levels of experience ($b = –6.6380$, 95% CI [–11.2543, –2.0217], $p = .0049$). These findings suggest that inclusive leadership is more negatively affected by school vulnerability among principals with longer professional trajectories.

Figure 1

Perception of Inclusive Leadership by Gender, Job Position, and Academic Training
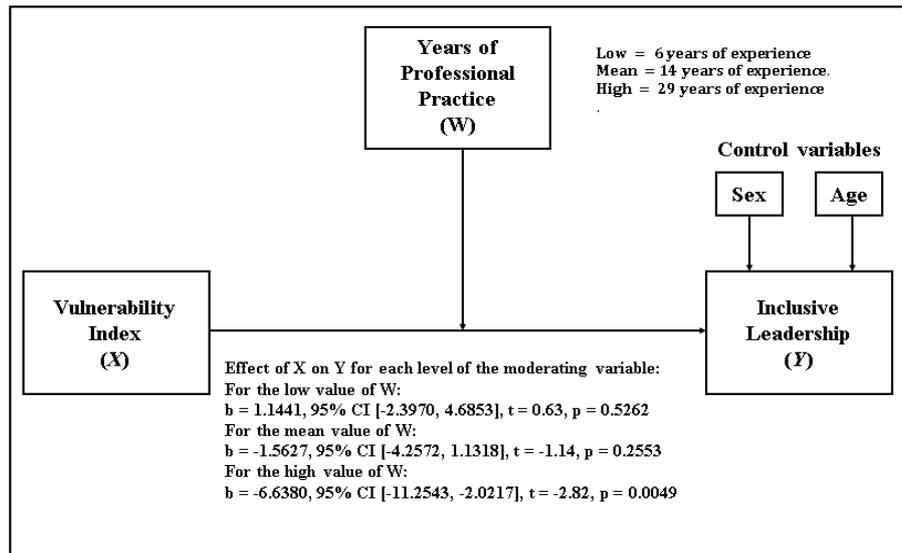
The findings suggest that gender, job position, and level of academic training are factors that influence the perception or reporting of inclusive leadership (figure 1). Additionally, years of professional experience significantly moderate the effect of the Vulnerability Index on inclusive leadership, especially among individuals with more experience, where the impact is more pronounced and negative.
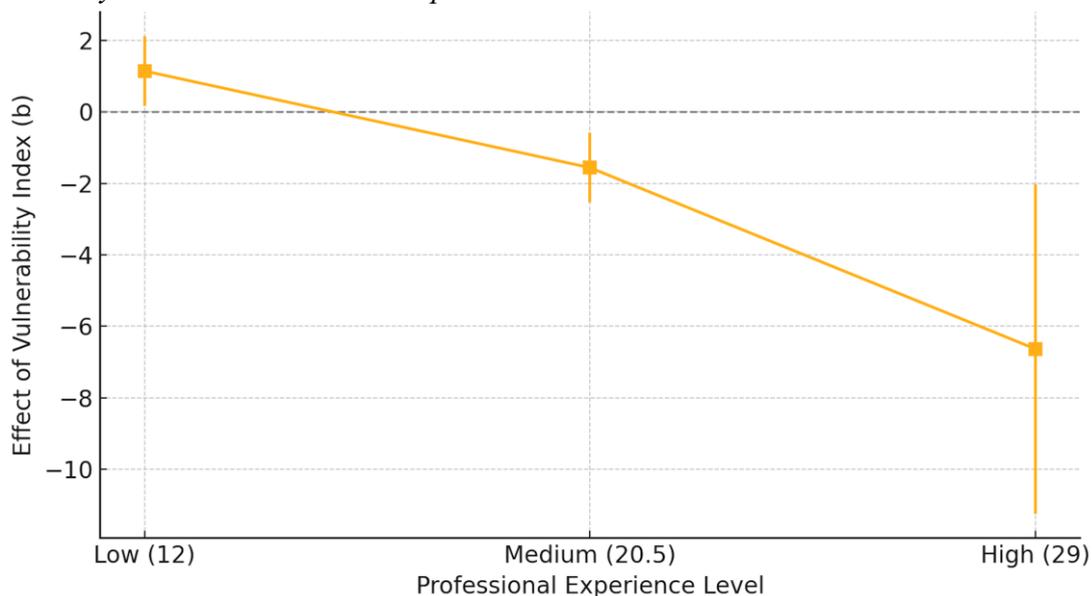
Figure 2.

Moderating Effect of Professional Experience on the Relationship between School Vulnerability and Inclusive Leadership

Figure 2 illustrates the conditional effects of the School Vulnerability Index on inclusive leadership across three levels of professional experience (low, medium, and high). Error bars

represent 95% confidence intervals. Only the effect at the high experience level (29 years) was statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Discussion

The data show that men report significantly higher levels of inclusive leadership compared to women. While this difference is statistically significant, its interpretation requires caution. One possible explanation relates to the persistence of androcentric structures in educational leadership, which may affect how men and women perceive and assess leadership practices (Blackmore, 2017). Women, who tend to be more engaged in care practices and more aware of exclusionary dynamics (Carrasco, 2023), might assess inclusive leadership more critically, particularly when it fails to explicitly challenge structural inequalities. Some studies suggest that female principals may foster more collaborative school environments (Bush, 2022), yet the evidence on gender and leadership style remains inconclusive (Valdés, 2022; Abonyi et al., 2024). Therefore, these results invite further exploration of how gender roles, expectations, and biases influence the evaluation and enactment of inclusive leadership in different educational settings. This will allow for a more equitable and critical understanding of how inclusive leadership manifests in different gender contexts.

Principals and educational assistants, who hold roles with greater responsibilities or direct contact with school management, report higher levels of inclusive leadership than teachers. This difference may stem from the fact that those in leadership positions, holding more institutionalized hierarchical roles, have a more organizational perspective on the leadership practices they develop. It could also suggest that hierarchical roles perceive themselves as more responsible for promoting inclusion within the school context. In contrast, teachers, who perform more specific teaching-related roles, tend to be more critical in their evaluations. Additionally, it is plausible that teachers have higher or more specific expectations regarding inclusive leadership, as they directly experience the outcomes of the policies and practices implemented in the classroom (Valdés et al., 2023). This greater demand on the part of teachers may be attributed to their focus on teaching quality and learning, in line with the mandates of educational policy (Valdés & Fardella, 2022).

Our findings indicate that more experienced school leaders working in highly vulnerable contexts report lower levels of inclusive leadership. Although the literature does not show conclusive evidence on the direct relationship between professional experience and leadership style (Gore et al., 2024; Sawati et al., 2013), some studies suggest that, over time, prolonged exposure to structural challenges may diminish leaders' adaptability and emotional availability (Tomova et al., 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2021). In such contexts, leaders may face emotional fatigue, reduced motivation, or revert to traditional approaches perceived as safer (Mbokazi & Bhengu, 2008). As Ross (2023) argues, inclusive leadership in vulnerable schools requires not only technical skills, but also a high degree of emotional engagement and flexibility. These hypotheses highlight the need to further investigate the emotional demands of inclusive leadership, particularly in under-resourced schools.

An unexpected finding from the study is that staff members with basic academic training report higher perceptions of inclusive leadership than those with postgraduate education. This

result does not align clearly with previous literature, where no consistent pattern has been found between educational attainment and leadership style (Githaiga & Kipsoi, 2020; Kalaǧan & Güzeller, 2010). One possible interpretation is that postgraduate training may emphasize theoretical or technical dimensions of leadership, making staff with advanced education more critical of leadership practices that do not align with ideal models. Conversely, those with less academic training might value practical, relational, or contextual aspects of leadership more positively, particularly in terms of support and inclusion. As Fardella et al. (2023) suggest, staff evaluate leadership based on their own situated experiences and expectations. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing diverse sources of knowledge within school communities and promoting mutual learning across different levels of training and experience (Améstica, 2023). Further research is needed to clarify how academic background shapes perceptions of leadership in inclusive school environments.

These findings suggest that support strategies should be implemented for more experienced leaders in high-vulnerability contexts, who may be experiencing greater difficulties in exercising inclusive leadership. Furthermore, inclusive leadership training should be more integrated into professional development programs, particularly at advanced levels of education (Deppeler & Aikens, 2020).

One key recommendation is to implement self-care and emotional well-being strategies for experienced school leaders, including mindfulness, emotional regulation tools, and resilience-based coaching. These approaches have proven effective in reducing stress and improving problem-solving in educational contexts. Additionally, training in transformational and adaptive leadership can strengthen collaboration, flexibility, and innovation—factors linked to higher job satisfaction and lower emotional fatigue.

Given the interpretative nature of some of the findings, it is recommended that future studies incorporate qualitative methods—such as interviews or focus groups—to explore in greater depth how staff members understand and experience inclusive leadership in their specific contexts. This would help enrich the analysis and strengthen the validity of the results.

It is also suggested that educational policies reduce the administrative burdens faced by school principals and leadership teams, allowing them to refocus their work on the core pedagogical and leadership tasks: supporting, guiding, and transforming teaching and learning processes. In the Chilean context, various studies have shown that a significant portion of school leaders' time is spent on bureaucratic tasks, technical reports, and compliance with administrative demands imposed by the quality assurance system and school providers (Valenzuela et al., 2023). This overload limits their capacity to lead meaningful pedagogical processes and to create institutional conditions that support inclusion.

In this regard, it is essential that the Chilean state not only maintains but increases the allocation of financial, human, and technical resources to schools located in highly vulnerable social contexts, as defined by the School Vulnerability Index (IVE). This is not simply a matter of increasing funding, but of ensuring that resources are relevant, flexible, and timely, allowing each school to respond contextually to the specific needs of its community. This includes, for example, strengthening the role of school climate and coexistence teams, psychosocial support programs, and continuous teacher training initiatives in the areas of inclusion, equity, and educational justice.

Finally, it is strongly recommended to promote distributed forms of leadership within schools, moving beyond the traditional view of the principal as the sole authority. Conceiving leadership as a collective process makes it possible to recognize and empower the roles of key stakeholders such as teachers, support staff, education assistants, students, and families. In the Chilean context—where hierarchical school cultures and vertical management models still persist—promoting a culture of shared leadership is essential to building more democratic, collaborative, and inclusive educational communities. Achieving this transformation requires not only political will but also technical support, spaces for collective reflection, and decent working conditions for all those who work in schools.

To advance toward this goal, it is important to translate these recommendations into concrete public policy actions. For instance, reducing administrative burdens could involve revising current accountability frameworks to prioritize pedagogical leadership over bureaucratic compliance. In parallel, teacher education programs should incorporate specific training in inclusive leadership, including collaborative practices, critical reflection on diversity, and the promotion of democratic school cultures. These measures could contribute to a systemic shift toward more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Limitations

The limitations of this study lie in the limited consideration of additional independent variables, which could have allowed for a more in-depth and multifactorial analysis of inclusive leadership. Including factors such as institutional context, available resources, or community dynamics could have enriched the approach. Additionally, it would be crucial to incorporate the voices of students and families to gain a systemic view of inclusive leadership that considers perceptions and impacts from different educational actors. This would broaden the analytical framework and allow for a more holistic understanding. In terms of future directions, it is recommended to initiate research that explores the formation of inclusive leaders more deeply, with a specific focus on gender equity. It is also essential to study effective practices for managing school environments characterized by high complexity and vulnerability so that leaders can adapt to these contexts. Finally, it is fundamental to recognize and value the different cultural capitals present in schools and how they influence leadership and inclusion, fostering practices that respect and enhance cultural diversity within educational communities.

Conclusion

The results show that inclusive leadership varies by gender, job position, and level of academic training. Men report significantly higher inclusive leadership than women ($t = 3.20$, $p < 0.05$). No significant differences were observed by age, although younger participants (18-25 years) reported higher scores. In terms of position, principals reported the highest inclusive leadership scores, while teachers reported the lowest ($F = 6.66$, $p < 0.001$). Academic training also influenced the results, with those having basic education reporting higher levels of inclusive leadership ($F = 3.56$, $p < 0.05$). Correlations show that the Vulnerability Index does not have a

significant relationship with inclusive leadership. However, years of professional experience moderate the relationship between the Vulnerability Index and inclusive leadership. At low and medium levels of experience, this relationship is not significant, but it becomes negatively significant in individuals with more experience (b = -6.64, p < 0.01). This suggests that the Vulnerability Index negatively impacts inclusive leadership in those with more years of professional experience.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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