Educational Practices in Migratory Contexts: Encounters between Children, Families, and Educators in Early Childhood Education Centers

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Educational centers serve as valuable spaces for interaction and socialization for individuals who have migrated in search of better opportunities. Early childhood education, in particular, adheres to pedagogical principles that emphasize diverse learning approaches and the emotional bonds fundamental to integration into local communities. This study aims to analyze educational practices in centers with a high enrollment of children and families who have migrated to Chile. Through multiple case studies, interviews were conducted with directors, educators, and families of children aged 4 to 5 years from Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Haiti. The research was complemented by an analysis of the prescriptive curriculum, Institutional Educational Projects (PEI), and classroom planning. The findings reveal intuitive manifestations of intangible cultural heritage. While folklorized practices are implemented as a means of recognizing diverse cultures, they aim to embed intercultural knowledge with meaningful significance. **Keywords:** Early Childhood Classrooms; Intangible Heritage; Interculturality; Migration; Pedagogical Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as the most effective means for individuals to become full members of their host society (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022). However, mere access to education does not necessarily guarantee the fulfillment of these rights.

One of the major challenges faced by migrant children and adolescents is gaining access to education. Many of them interrupted their studies when leaving their countries of origin and embarked on long journeys with their families—journeys that, in some cases, took years before reaching Chile. The disruption of their educational trajectory not only causes learning delays but also affects their socio-emotional development and integration into host communities (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2022).

In Chile, as of 2021, the estimated number of migrants was 1,482,390, representing 7.5% of the country's total population. Most migrants originate from Latin American countries, with Venezuela accounting for 30.0%, Peru 16.6%, Colombia 11.7%, Bolivia 8.9%, and Argentina 5.2%. In the last decade, the country has also seen an increasing number of migrants from Central America, particularly Haiti, which now constitutes 12.2% of the migrant population. Geographically, the regions with the highest migrant populations are located in northern Chile—Antofagasta, Tarapacá, and Arica y Parinacota—along with the Metropolitan Region. In the southern regions, Maule and Bío-Bío represent approximately 3% of total school enrollments. By 2022, official records indicated that 240,515 foreign students were enrolled in the Chilean school system, accounting for 6.6% of total enrollments (National Migration Service and National Statistics Institute [INE], 2021).

The increasing presence of migrant students presents new challenges for schools, compelling educational

institutions to embrace inclusion responsibly. Migrant students often encounter obstacles not only in learning but also in terms of socioeconomic, cultural, and health-related aspects, as well as prejudices related to their ethnic origins (Tijoux, 2013). Migration as a phenomenon of territorial displacement requires a critical re-examination of how children who migrate with their families integrate into the host society and, consequently, into schools. However, this integration process must not result in assimilation to the extent of erasing the cultural codes that represent their roots and identities (Canaza-Choque, 2021).

Cultural identity begins to develop during childhood and is expressed through various life experiences across different environments where children grow up (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Schools play a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity by fostering a continuous negotiation process between students and teachers. These interactions are shaped by diverse social experiences and by similarities and differences in aspects such as language, religion, and cuisine. Cultural identity is thus dynamic, connecting emotional elements with personal narratives and inherited cultural traditions (Scollon et al., 2012).

However, educational communities with migrant students often face tensions due to a lack of adequate tools and guidelines to support inclusion. The rising enrollment of migrant students places additional demands on educational institutions, particularly teachers, who struggle to develop flexible content that incorporates the diverse experiences of these students (Carrillo, 2016). Although policy documents have been developed to guide the educational inclusion of migrant students (Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2018; National Quality Agency, 2019), achieving truly inclusive schools from pedagogical, administrative, cultural, and human rights perspectives remains a significant challenge (Linares et al., 2018). Existing policies primarily aim to foster learning in different subjects within the Chilean curriculum and to facilitate the integration of students into school communities at the primary and secondary levels. However, they often overlook the identity-related processes necessary to promote inclusion by recognizing the heritage value that migrant children bring with them.

In early childhood education, achieving social and educational inclusion necessarily involves acknowledging the cultural heritage and identities of migrant children. A study on the inclusion of migrant children and their families in Chile's preschool education system (Jesuit Migrant Service [SJM], 2018) revealed parental concerns regarding the loss of their children's cultural identity. Parents expressed apprehensions about the rapid assimilation of Chilean customs, dietary habits, and cultural practices, which often overshadow their native traditions. Furthermore, language barriers—especially for Haitian families, whose native language is Creole—exacerbate exclusion and reinforce racial prejudices within Chilean society.

Educational institutions serving children aged 0 to 6 years (preschool education) benefit from intercultural advisors who support kindergartens and schools. However, these efforts remain insufficient due to disparities among institutions with different administrative dependencies. Schools are expected to serve as spaces for socialization, fostering inclusive and respectful processes for migrant children. However, the strategies applied in practice often reflect a multicultural model that prioritizes harmonious coexistence and respect for diversity rather than a critical approach that addresses existing inequalities and promotes genuine inclusion and interculturality in the classroom (Espinoza & Valdebenito, 2018; Mora-Olate, 2019).

Pedagogical factors also play a critical role in facilitating the inclusion process. The cultural background that migrant children bring with them can sometimes become a barrier to accessing education. This challenge is particularly evident among Haitian children who do not speak Spanish, as schools often lack the necessary tools to support their linguistic integration (Poblete & Galaz, 2017).
Early childhood education presents a unique opportunity to value cultural heritage, as the curriculum offers greater flexibility in content, which should facilitate the inclusion of didactic experiences in heritage education (Jun & Ly, 2022).
Thus, recognizing the cultural heritage of migrant students—embodied in their intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions, social practices, rituals, and festive events—and acknowledging them as cultural bearers within the classroom is essential. This recognition enriches the curriculum, fosters an inclusive and respectful perspective on identity, and promotes a truly intercultural curriculum (Sanhueza et al., 2019).
Considering that educational practices reflect how schools and their stakeholders implement inclusive policies and integrate teaching to overcome learning barriers (Booth & Ainscow, 2000), this study explores how educational practices are developed in early childhood classrooms, how children, families, and teachers interact in intercultural spaces, and how educational centers respond to the diverse cultural identities of migrant children and families.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative paradigm and adopts an ethnographic approach to better understand and recreate the shared beliefs, practices, and behaviors of the study participants (Goetz & Le Compte, 1988). The study takes a descriptive approach, focusing on participants' narratives about social inclusion, the identity

formation of migrant children, and the integration of intangible cultural heritage as both content and a didactic resource in the educational process.

To gain deeper insights into classroom dynamics, non-participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) was conducted. This allowed for the detailed documentation of classroom situations in early childhood education centers, helping to identify causal relationships between behaviors and the beliefs associated with them.

The study employed a multiple case study approach (Stake, 1998), involving three educational institutions that cater to children aged 4 to 5 years in municipalities within the Metropolitan Region of Santiago, areas characterized by a high concentration of migrant populations.

To collect qualitative data, semi-structured and in-depth interviews (Flick, 2012) were conducted with key stakeholders: three early childhood education teachers, three school directors, four migrant families through individual interviews, and one group interview involving ten migrant families from Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Haiti. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed to ensure accuracy and thorough analysis.

Ethical considerations were a fundamental part of the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the potential benefits of the research. Participants were also assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses throughout the entire study.

To gain a comprehensive perspective, a total of five classroom observations were conducted at each educational level. Each observation lasted for a full four-hour class session over a six-month period. In addition, documentary analysis was carried out, examining the Institutional Educational Projects (PEI) of each school and reviewing lesson plans prepared by early childhood educators.

The data obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews were analyzed using content analysis based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002), employing the constant comparative method. This analytical process allowed the identification of key themes and patterns across the data, breaking down texts into units of meaning and constructing categories that aligned with the study's objectives.

The analysis was conducted in several stages:
Initial coding: Field notes, observation records, interviews, and institutional documents were reviewed in detail to extract meaningful units and generate initial codes.

Category formation: Codes were then grouped by identifying relationships and patterns, leading to the development of preliminary categories.

Selective coding: A deeper level of analysis followed, in which the most significant categories were refined and linked to form a coherent framework (Bonilla-García & López-Suárez, 2016).

Final categorization: The most relevant themes were selected based on the density and significance of the citations across the dataset.

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, a methodological triangulation approach (Mucchielli, 2001) was applied. This process involved comparing results obtained through different data collection techniques to identify consistent patterns and diverse perspectives. Ultimately, the categories established were derived from a comprehensive cross-sectional analysis of all collected data.

RESULTS

Inclusion and Integration as Concepts and Educational Practices

The institutions involved in this study declare in their Institutional Educational Projects (PEI) a commitment to values and principles that promote inclusive education, respect for social diversity, non-discrimination, respect for children's rights, and the participation of the educational community and families. These principles are reflected in their stated objectives of providing inclusive, diverse, and comprehensive education, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

Children who understand and value cultural diversity without losing their own identity. (PEI School 1)
Children capable of recognizing and expressing their emotions and feelings.

Children who assert their rights.
Institutional definitions and purposes.
Strategies for promoting and disseminating children's rights.
Non-discrimination.

No child shall suffer discrimination based on race, color, gender, language, religion, nationality, social origin, caste, or disability. The child's best interest. (PEI School 2)

Promote a culture of peace among children and the community through positive interactions and appropriate expressions in contexts relevant to their reality.

Active participation of all members of the educational community in celebrations and commemorations outlined in our annual plan. (PEI School 3)

Preschools place a strong emphasis on culturally, territorially, and gender-relevant education, recognizing the diverse ways in which communities inhabit their environments. They acknowledge various cultural influences and both local and national histories through hands-on experiences that actively engage the community. These efforts aim to raise awareness about the significance of early education and its critical role in fostering the holistic development of children (PEI, School 3).

Despite these efforts, an important gap remains. While schools generally align with ministerial policies and directives on non-discrimination, a closer examination of their Institutional Educational Projects (PEIs) reveals that none explicitly address respect for the cultural identity and heritage of migrant children and their families. Instead, the responsibility of fostering cultural inclusion is left to the individual initiatives of each school.

At a national level, the curriculum does not explicitly adopt an intercultural approach, even though it follows international guidelines. The current framework primarily focuses on Indigenous populations, in accordance with Indigenous Law 19.253, which recognizes and safeguards Indigenous culture and language through bilingual intercultural education. However, the needs of migrant communities are not explicitly considered, leaving a significant gap in creating an educational system that fully embraces cultural diversity (Mardones, 2017; Mora-Olate, 2019).

While many schools have shown increased awareness and sensitivity towards the growing migrant population, their efforts largely remain within the realm of integration rather than inclusion. This distinction is crucial yet often misunderstood. Educational teams must further reflect on how true inclusion connects with interculturality—a concept often used interchangeably with integration but fundamentally different (Marín-Alaniz, 2018). A teacher's perspective captures this sentiment:

"There are many foreign children here, and I think it's wonderful that the school integrates them because they contribute so much culturally to our Chilean children."

(Teacher, School 1, Interview, May 22, 2022)

The difference between inclusion and integration lies in their fundamental principles. Inclusion is rooted in equality and non-discrimination, requiring the implementation of strategies that remove barriers to education. These strategies ensure access, retention, and successful learning outcomes that support children's educational paths. In contrast, integration focuses primarily on how marginalized individuals adapt to the existing structures and methodologies of educational institutions (FOCUS, 2019).

Chile has ratified several international frameworks and treaties (UNESCO, 2017; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [CEPAL], 2018), committing the state to ensure equitable and non-discriminatory educational inclusion, promoting timely and quality learning for all children. National policies, such as the School Inclusion Law No. 20.845 (2015) and the Early Childhood Education Curricular Bases (2018), reaffirm these principles by advocating for schools to become spaces where students from diverse cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds can interact and thrive.

Despite these policies, findings from this study reveal a lack of awareness among school administrators and teachers regarding existing guidelines for the inclusion of migrant students (MINEDUC, 2018; MINEDUC, 2019; National Quality Agency, 2019). Many educators report having received little to no formal training on how to effectively address the needs of migrant children. As a result, schools and preschools have resorted to developing their own strategies to communicate with students who do not speak Spanish. Teachers have shown remarkable initiative by adapting their teaching methods and creating supportive and practical resources, as reflected in their statements:

"Years ago, we received some training for school directors and educational teams on welcoming migrant families and accepting cultural differences, particularly regarding the Haitian community. However, these training sessions are not held regularly, and there is no permanent support system in place."

(Director, School 2, Interview, May 19, 2022)
Another teacher shared a similar challenge:

"We haven't received any official guidance from MINEDUC or JUNJI on how to better support migrant students. We've requested training, but so far, there's been no response. We've had to look for small courses and resources on our own, but no structured support has been provided."

(Teacher, School 2, Interview, May 30, 2022)

In some instances, educators have taken creative approaches to bridge the language gap. One school director explained how they addressed communication barriers with Haitian families:

"We created a small dictionary—we downloaded it from the internet. We listed common words we needed to use with the students and their families. I often used Google Translate, writing messages in Spanish and sending them in Creole, just so we could reach them."

(Director, School 1, Interview, June 2, 2022)

These accounts highlight the need for a more structured and sustained effort from educational authorities to provide resources and training that support the meaningful inclusion of migrant children. While schools have shown great initiative, they cannot and should not shoulder this responsibility alone. The challenge of moving from integration to true inclusion requires a collaborative effort that involves national policies, institutional commitment, and adequate teacher training to create a truly inclusive and intercultural educational experience for all children.

Identity Marks in Schools Expressed Through Activities with Families
The interviews reveal a multicultural approach within schools that embraces and respects migrant families by acknowledging their differences and seeking to include them in the school environment. This inclusion is primarily achieved through activities that allow families to share their cultural backgrounds with the educational community. Events such as multicultural fairs and Chilean national celebrations provide opportunities for families to present their national symbols and traditional foods. This approach is exemplified in the following statements:

"Generally, what we do is invite families to showcase their culture, tell us where they come from, and show their flag. We always do that. If we have a migrant family, we ask them to talk to the children and share a bit of their story. But generally, that's about it. It's not something more developed; it's just to let the children know that they come from another country."

(Director, School 2, Interview, May 19, 2022)

"Well, the teacher welcomed me warmly. I also participated in all the Chilean activities because they mostly celebrate Chilean traditions here. I remember that, as the years passed, the teachers started organizing Mapuche festivities, considering that there are now many foreigners. They invited us to prepare typical dishes to share with the parents."

(Peruvian Mother, School 2, Interview, September 7, 2022)

These efforts reflect a clear intention to foster inclusion and avoid discrimination, with gastronomy emerging as a central element of cultural expression. While this initiative is a positive step, it remains insufficient in fully addressing the deeper aspects of cultural heritage and identity. A closer analysis of these activities reveals a tendency toward folklorization—a surface-level representation of cultural diversity that lacks deeper engagement with the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

Recognizing and valuing ICH is fundamental in the construction of cultural identity and is considered a human right (León & Faundes, 2021). In intercultural and migratory contexts, it is essential to safeguard and preserve these intangible aspects of culture, such as traditions, practices, and community knowledge. However, this study indicates that ICH is not explicitly acknowledged or incorporated into pedagogical practices by educators. This oversight is reflected in the following comments:

"Yes, we work on migrant integration in certain activities, mainly through daily planning and various events held at the preschool. We try to include it."

(Teacher, School 2, Interview, May 30, 2022)

"We are an intercultural school; we're not just Chilean, and there aren't only Chileans here. For our September 18th national celebrations, we organize intercultural games, displaying the Chilean, Haitian, and Colombian flags."
(Director, School 3, Interview, June 6, 2022)

Although teachers and school administrators acknowledge the importance of recognizing children's cultural backgrounds, these efforts are often limited to specific school events and celebrations involving families. The inclusion of migrant cultures typically occurs through family participation in activities designed to showcase their heritage, as reflected in these excerpts:

"We also had the collaboration of all the Haitian families in our school. We engaged them in activities where they were asked to share their origins, create family trees, and explain where they come from. This way, they could tell a bit of their history, and we believe it's essential for families to feel part of the educational space."

(Director, School 3, Interview, June 6, 2022)

"I think it was in September, during the national holidays, when they asked us to bring something from our country—like a little flag or anything for decoration. They always include us in these kinds of things. For example, they ask us to make pancakes or some traditional food from our country. When they organize activities, they say, 'Let's make a cake, like the ones you make there,' and so on. They do include us."

(Venezuelan Mother, School 1, Interview, June 13, 2022)
These narratives highlight the positive intentions of schools to embrace cultural diversity. However, the study suggests that schools primarily focus on cultural display rather than deep integration of cultural knowledge into the curriculum. Schools could further enhance their efforts by integrating migrant cultural heritage into everyday teaching practices and fostering sustained engagement beyond occasional events.

Key Considerations for Enhancing Cultural Inclusion:
Moving Beyond Folklorization:
Schools should aim to incorporate ICH into daily educational practices rather than limiting it to celebratory events.

Empowering Teachers:
Providing professional development opportunities to help educators understand the value of ICH and its relevance in early childhood education.

Involving Families in Educational Planning:
Engaging migrant families as co-creators of learning experiences rather than just participants in cultural events.

By adopting a more holistic and sustained approach, schools can move from symbolic recognition to meaningful inclusion, ensuring that migrant children feel seen, valued, and empowered within their educational environments.

Between the Similar and the Different: Games and Food
Among the various social practices that shape cultural identity, games play a fundamental role in fostering a sense of belonging and connection to one's heritage. Migrant families often recognize striking similarities between the games played in their countries of origin and those enjoyed by Chilean children, with differences primarily seen in terminology rather than in the essence of the games themselves. Teachers leverage these familiar elements as effective tools to promote inclusion in intercultural activities within schools.

As one teacher shared:
"Yes, for instance, we have children talk about the games they used to play or the ones they know from their culture, as well as their traditional clothing and food."

(Teacher, School 3, Interview, May 16, 2022)
This sentiment is echoed by a migrant mother, who described her experience:

"Games? Yes. Well, I find them quite similar here. Back home, we played what they call 'las pilladas' or 'la pinta' here. Back home, it's called something else. They're the same games with different names. Also, 'escondidas' [hide-and-seek] and the 'San Miguel' rounds, and there was also a 'cat and mouse' round game, which I've also seen here but with a different name. My daughter once played it at the preschool, and I saw it with the kids. They're the same; they're identical."

(Peruvian Mother, School 2, Interview, September 7, 2022)
These shared experiences highlight how play serves as a common cultural bridge, allowing children from diverse backgrounds to find common ground and build connections with their peers. The familiarity of these games offers comfort and fosters a sense of inclusion, demonstrating that cultural differences do not necessarily imply unfamiliarity but rather variations of shared experiences.

Similarly, cooking and food hold a profound cultural significance, acting as powerful ties to one's heritage and traditions. Food traditions are not only a means of sustenance but also a way for families to maintain their identity and pass on cultural knowledge to the younger generations. A parent reflects on how food connects them to their homeland:

"Yes, we eat like we do back home. For example, we prepare black beans the same way, not like here where they make them into a salad. We make 'pabellón' [a Venezuelan dish], which includes rice, shredded beef, black beans, and plantain slices, all on the same plate. You might have seen Venezuelan plantains at the market."

(Venezuelan Mother, School 1, Interview, June 13, 2022)
Food transcends national boundaries, evolving into a cultural heritage that families carry with them, offering familiarity and comfort in an unfamiliar environment. Cooking is not merely an act of preparing meals but a way of preserving identity and tradition across generations. A mother elaborates on this connection:

"For breakfast, for example, we have arepas [Venezuelan food] with cheese or cachapas [a traditional Venezuelan dish made from corn]. When it's corn season, we make cachapas, which are like 'humitas' [Chilean corn-based dish], but without seasonings—just sugar and milk. It's made like a pancake, a sort of corn pancake. We eat it with cheese or pork cracklings. But yes, it's similar to our food, especially for lunch."

(Venezuelan Mother, School 1, Interview, June 13, 2022)
These insights highlight how gastronomy plays a crucial role in the cultural adaptation process, allowing families to retain a sense of identity while embracing new experiences. Food becomes an educational tool, introducing children and their peers to different flavors, customs, and traditions, fostering greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity within the school environment.

Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage Through Everyday Practices
The recognition of food and play as key aspects of cultural heritage aligns with the broader concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), which encompasses traditions, customs, and knowledge passed down through generations (Arista, 2020). Schools have the opportunity to integrate these elements into their educational practices, creating spaces where cultural diversity is not only celebrated but also embedded into the daily lives of children.

Recommendations for Enhancing Cultural Inclusion:
Incorporating Cultural Activities into Curriculum:
Teachers can include traditional games and recipes as part of learning experiences, linking them to educational goals such as teamwork, communication, and cultural awareness.

Encouraging Family Participation:
Schools should actively involve parents in sharing their culinary traditions and storytelling, enriching classroom discussions and providing children with a deeper understanding of their cultural roots.

Promoting Cross-Cultural Exchange:
Encouraging children to explore and appreciate each other's customs through food tastings and interactive game sessions can foster mutual respect and cultural appreciation.
By integrating these culturally significant practices, schools can move beyond surface-level inclusion and provide a richer, more meaningful experience that values each child's unique background, ensuring that cultural heritage remains an integral part of their educational journey.

Educational Experiences in the Classroom: A Monocultural Approach and the Invisibility of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

In the Chilean curriculum, heritage is primarily addressed as an objective, content area, and educational resource within subjects such as Social Sciences, History, and Geography (Montanares et al., 2019). However, the curriculum largely frames heritage through a nationalist lens, presenting it with a historicist and monocultural discourse (Berrios et al., 2020; Aroca et al., 2022). As a result, heritage education is often limited to celebrating national holidays, commemorations, and other Chilean traditions, which serve as platforms for integrating migrant families into school life. Yet, these initiatives often follow a rigid curricular framework, operating under an assimilationist logic, as reflected in the experiences shared by educators and parents:

"We recognized the Venezuelan flag and included it in our activities. We compared the colors, watched a video explaining its meaning, and also discussed the Chilean star, emphasizing the importance of respecting both flags."

(Teacher, School 1, Interview, May 22, 2022)

"We celebrate the We Tripantu [a Mapuche new year celebration], incorporating traditional elements. Some families bring sopaipillas, others prepare muday [a traditional Mapuche drink]. We hold the ceremony, play the kultrun [a traditional drum], sing, dress up, and create trapelacucha [traditional ornaments] or headbands in the corresponding colors."

(Teacher, School 3, Interview, May 16, 2022)

While these efforts indicate a willingness to include cultural diversity, they primarily revolve around Chilean customs. The intention to embrace other cultures is evident, but the activities often fall short of meaningful intercultural integration, remaining surface-level and celebratory. One parent shared:

"I felt very welcome by the teacher. I took part in all the Chilean celebrations because those are the main ones they celebrate here. Over time, the school also introduced Mapuche festivities, inviting us to prepare traditional dishes and share them with other parents."

(Peruvian Mother, School 2, Interview, September 7, 2022)

Despite these positive experiences, the predominant approach remains one of integration rather than true inclusion, often lacking deeper engagement with the cultural roots and identities of migrant families. Some schools have started moving toward greater inclusion by encouraging families to actively share their heritage through presentations and storytelling, as illustrated by a Haitian father:

"I felt happy because it was my first time participating in an activity like this here. Talking about my country made me feel proud because otherwise, people wouldn't know what Haiti is really like. Many people just assume things, but hearing it from a Haitian gives a real perspective."

(Haitian Father, School 2, Interview, May 30, 2022)

In addition to storytelling, cultural practices such as hairstyling have become a means of cultural expression. A teacher described how Haitian mothers shared their traditional hair-braiding techniques:

"They love showing their hairstyles; every week they come in with different braids. I've asked them about their culture and learned that braiding hair was historically used to hide food seeds during times of struggle. I'm fascinated by this, but they just smile when I ask about it."

(Teacher, School 3, Interview, May 16, 2022)

A field observation further highlights how these traditions were incorporated into the classroom:

Field Observation (Transition Level, June 9, 2022):

The teacher points to a child's braids and says:

"Look at this hair—it's beautiful. Braids are lovely. He (pointing to another child with short hair) can't have them, but they are part of your culture."

Another observation captures an interactive activity where a Haitian mother demonstrates hairstyling techniques to both teachers and students:

Teacher: "Would you like to try braiding hair?"
Mother: "Yes, I can show you."

Teacher: "Who would like to get their hair braided?"
Child: "Me!"
These efforts, while encouraging, highlight the need for a more structured, intentional integration of cultural heritage into educational practices, moving beyond isolated activities to a more comprehensive approach that fosters cultural identity within the learning environment.

Language as a Barrier, Communication as a Bridge

Language is a critical element in the inclusion process, often serving as both a bridge and a barrier. Schools faced significant challenges in communicating with Haitian families, as the language gap made everyday interactions difficult. Each school had to develop its own strategies to address this issue, with many relying on translation tools and bilingual students as mediators:

"In the case of the Haitians, yes, they helped us with translations. The mothers—there was no way to communicate with them because, in their culture, it's usually the men who go out and learn Spanish, while the women stay at home. We couldn't really communicate with the mothers; they didn't understand anything."

(Director, School 1, Interview, June 2, 2022)

In some classrooms, teachers engaged students in learning basic words in Haitian Creole to foster mutual understanding:

Teacher: "What is this called?" (shows a hair clip)
Student (Haitian girl): "Pou."
Teacher: "Do you remember how to say 'silence' in Creole?"
Student: "Silans."

Teachers also introduced key phrases in Creole to communicate with students more effectively:
Pa goumen (don't fight)
Pa kole (don't hit)
Bo (kiss)
Mwen renmen oute (I love you)
Akolad (hug)
(Field Note, Classroom Experience, School 3, August 11, 2022)

For Spanish-speaking migrant families, communication challenges were less pronounced. Despite differences in terminology and expressions, Venezuelan and Peruvian children were often praised for their language skills:
"Venezuelan children, I feel, are a great asset for us. They are confident, have excellent vocabulary, and articulate their thoughts well. They've enriched our vocabulary and activities."
(Director, School 1, Interview, June 2, 2022)
Parents also noticed how their children naturally adopted Chilean expressions through socialization:
"My son now says 'po' like Chileans. He asks for arepas, and then says, 'po,' and I ask him, 'Are you Chilean now?'"
(Venezuelan Mother, School 3, Group Interview, August 19, 2022)
Similarly, an Ecuadorian mother shared:
"My son says, 'Okay, Mom, call the school, po.' I asked him, 'Where did you learn that?' He said, 'I heard it from my friend.'"

(Ecuadorian Mother, School 3, Group Interview, August 19, 2022)

While language acquisition is a natural process, the absence of structured language support programs limits the ability of schools to provide tailored support for non-Spanish speaking children, particularly Haitians. Schools rely heavily on informal strategies such as peer support and online translation tools, underscoring the need for more robust policies and resources to bridge the communication gap effectively.

Key Takeaways and Recommendations
Expand Intercultural Training for Educators:
Schools need targeted training to better address linguistic and cultural diversity, ensuring teachers are equipped with effective strategies for fostering inclusion.

Integrate Cultural Heritage into the Curriculum:
Rather than isolated celebrations, schools should embed intangible cultural heritage into daily lessons and

activities, encouraging deeper cultural understanding.

Strengthen Language Support Programs:

Implementing structured language support for non-Spanish speaking students can ease their transition and promote meaningful communication between families and schools.

By addressing these areas, schools can move from surface-level integration to a more holistic, inclusive educational experience that values and nurtures the diverse identities of all students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One of the key challenges identified in this study is the lack of an explicit intercultural approach in the national curriculum concerning the inclusion of migrant children. Although technical guidelines for the educational inclusion of foreign students exist, as highlighted by Mora-Olate (2019), their implementation remains inconsistent in practice. This gap underscores an ongoing issue that has persisted for years, with administrators, teachers, and families remaining largely unaware of the policies intended to support them. Despite the efforts made by the Ministry of Education through guidelines and resources (Mondaca et al., 2018; Poblete & Galaz, 2017), their integration into daily school practices has been slow and ineffective. Consequently, symbolic social boundaries continue to exist within school communities, influencing the daily experiences of migrant children and their families (Joiko, 2023).

Another crucial point of discussion is how heritage is addressed within school curricula. The approach to heritage education tends to be monumental and conservative, focusing heavily on historical commemorations and the celebration of national heroes. This emphasis reinforces a singular, hegemonic national identity while overlooking the diverse identities present in the school community (Berrios et al., 2020). Instead of reaffirming nationalism, school heritage practices should aim to foster reciprocal cultural integration by challenging nationalistic perspectives and promoting a broader, more inclusive view of cultural diversity (Caba & Rojas, 2014).

For migrant children, the first and most significant challenge in schools is communication—particularly for those who do not speak Spanish. Once communication barriers are addressed, the focus shifts to leveling prior knowledge and ensuring their social integration within the school environment. The increasing number of migrant students has placed pressure on the educational system, highlighting the urgent need to address student diversity both academically and culturally. However, the study reveals that many educators use the terms multiculturalism and interculturality interchangeably, reflecting a superficial understanding of these concepts. This lack of critical reflection suggests that the Chilean education system continues to operate within a homogenizing, monocultural, and adult-centered framework (Stang-Alba et al., 2021; Galaz et al., 2021).

The findings suggest that early childhood curricula in the schools studied take a predominantly multicultural approach—acknowledging the coexistence of various cultural groups but often stopping short of fostering true intercultural dialogue. While policies exist to provide tools for embracing diversity, in practice, these efforts primarily promote a harmonious coexistence rather than addressing deeper cultural inequalities (Stefoni et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the study highlights how cultural differences are frequently expressed through folklorization. Activities such as Chilean national celebrations that invite ethnic and minority groups to participate are perceived as inclusion strategies. While these efforts are a step in the right direction, their superficial nature limits their potential impact. Unless these initiatives are integrated into a comprehensive, long-term inclusion strategy, they risk becoming mere symbolic gestures within an assimilationist framework (Cerón et al., 2017).

From a legal perspective, it is important to recognize that intangible cultural expressions are protected under international agreements such as the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005). These agreements affirm that the right to cultural identity is fundamental to both individual and collective dignity, acknowledging identity and culture as inherent human rights (León & Faúndez, 2022). Schools, therefore, have a responsibility to respect, value, and preserve the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of migrant students and their families. However, this study found that such recognition is minimal in the schools analyzed, indicating a significant gap in the implementation of inclusive educational practices.

The findings also show that ICH is reflected in various school activities, such as cultural fairs, food exhibitions, and symbolic gestures recognizing national symbols of different countries. Some progress has

been made, particularly in inviting parents to share their cultural backgrounds with students, aligning with similar experiences documented in other Chilean schools (Martínez et al., 2019; Beniscelli et al., 2019). However, teachers' understanding of ICH remains largely intuitive and lacks a structured framework, suggesting a need for professional development in this area.

Language emerges as another crucial aspect of cultural identity and educational inclusion. Despite its significant role in shaping identity and providing opportunities for self-expression, native languages are often undervalued or overlooked in educational settings. Migrant children are frequently expected to prioritize Spanish as a means of integration, with their native languages relegated to secondary importance. This approach tends to frame language as a barrier rather than a valuable cultural asset, reinforcing a dominant cultural perspective that undermines linguistic diversity and limits opportunities for true intercultural exchange.

While existing literature emphasizes the importance of recognizing cultural diversity to enhance student inclusion (Grau-Rengifo et al., 2021), this study draws attention to an underexplored issue: the inclusion of ICH within early childhood educational practices. The findings suggest that many educational institutions lack awareness and structured approaches to incorporate ICH into their learning experiences effectively.

In relation to the study's primary objectives—examining how early childhood educators create inclusive environments, how children and families interact in intercultural spaces, and how educational centers respond to the cultural diversity of migrant families—it is evident that:

Educators recognize the importance of integrating migrant children and families, though their strategies are often driven by immediate challenges, such as high enrollment rates, rather than long-term planning.

Despite Chile's commitment to international educational treaties, these policies have not fully translated into practice at the school level, leaving educators and administrators without sufficient guidance or resources (Joiko, 2023).

Cultural diversity is valued at a conceptual level, but pedagogical practices continue to reinforce assimilationist tendencies. These are most evident during national celebrations and civic events, which prioritize a homogeneous national identity rather than embracing cultural pluralism (Beniscelli et al., 2019).

Recommendations for Future Action

To foster truly inclusive and culturally responsive early childhood education, several key actions are recommended:

Strengthening teacher training programs: Educators should receive ongoing professional development to deepen their understanding of interculturality and ICH, equipping them with strategies to integrate cultural diversity meaningfully into their teaching practices.

Developing comprehensive intercultural policies at the school level: Schools should create explicit policies that recognize and celebrate the cultural heritage of migrant students, moving beyond occasional events to sustained, curriculum-embedded initiatives.

Enhancing linguistic support: Schools should implement language programs that support the use of native languages alongside Spanish, fostering bilingualism and valuing linguistic diversity as a cultural asset rather than a challenge.

Fostering stronger connections with migrant families: Involving families in decision-making processes and educational planning can create a more inclusive environment that respects and celebrates cultural differences.

By addressing these areas, educational institutions can transition from surface-level inclusion efforts to a more comprehensive, equity-based approach that values and integrates the diverse cultural backgrounds of all students.

Study Limitations

One limitation of this study is that migrant children in the schools were not included as research participants. This opens a new line of inquiry into civic participation from a rights-based perspective, incorporating children's voices through methodologies such as collaborative ethnographies, children's geographies, and participatory methods and techniques with children.

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