RESEARCH

Perspectives on Educational Inclusion from a Small Sample of Autistic Pupils in Santiago, Chile

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The Chilean government has introduced significant changes across the school system to facilitate the educational inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) via School Integration Programmes (SIPs). However, these policies have only been partially successful, with problems of stigmatisation and tokenistic inclusion reported. Meanwhile, other than through parental narratives, little information is available on the success of SIPs for pupils with SEND. In this small scale, exploratory case study based in a state school in Santiago, the views of five autistic pupils aged 10–19 were sought on their inclusion and participation in school. Using flexible, participatory methods and analysed via thematic analysis, the pupils provided important insights into their sensory issues, social and learning needs in school. Crucially in the Chilean context, they also revealed the particular impact of earthquake tremors on them. The implications of these findings for future research and educational practices are discussed.

Keywords: autism; educational inclusion; Chile; sensory issues; earthquakes

Introduction

In Chile, despite significant levels of social inequality (Quijada et al. 2018), laws promoting inclusive and non-selective education have been implemented over recent decades (Mineduc 1990, 1998, 2009). These laws confirm that education is a universal human right and that 'Education for All' should be available to all children, without discrimination (UNESCO 2001, 2008, 2014). As a result of these processes, schools in Chile, whether they are state-funded, state-subsidised private schools, or non-subsidised private schools – constituting 44%, 51% and 5% of all schools respectively (Santiago et al. 2017) – must arrange to be open to all pupils. Consequently, Chilean education settings have increasingly diverse populations, with growing numbers of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), such as autism, included in mainstream schools via School Integration Programmes (SIPs) (Mineduc 2016; Varela, San Martín & Villalobos 2015). This in turn has necessitated a more flexible and individualised approach when developing the education curriculum, as well as the involvement of a broader, multidisciplinary group of professionals to attend to the diverse needs of the pupils (Mineduc 2015, 2017).

However, doubts exist about whether the current system truly enables the educational inclusion of pupils with SEND, as intended by Chilean law. In 2018, approximately 5% of all pupils were registered in Chile as having special educational needs (BCN 2018), but there are concerns that they are not provided with the same opportunities as other children and young people (Santiago et al. 2017). Indeed, school professionals see pupils with SEND as both responsible for and the carrier of deficits (Cerreta 2018; López et al. 2014; Mellado Hernández et al. 2017) who must be reluctantly accepted and adapted to the valued norm (Díaz Meza & Atala Fuentes 2015). This failure to conceive of the educational inclusion of pupils with SEND as a desirable process leads teachers to portray them as different from the rest and to have lower expectations for them (López et al. 2014; Mellado Hernández et al. 2017). Moreover, 'SIP pupils', as they are described, are considered to be the sole remit of the specialist teacher, thus enabling the regular teacher to focus on the 'non-SIP' ones (Cornejo-Valderrama 2017).

Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that school professionals might have good intentions, many question whether current training, school structures and processes make educational inclusion a realisable goal, and doubt they have the ability to attend to the increased diversity of pupils in their schools (Sanhueza Henríquez, Granada Azcárraga, & Bravo Cóppola 2013; San Martín et al. 2017). Furthermore, even when the idea of inclusion is viewed positively by school staff, insecurity for pupils and fear of bullying are highlighted (Soto Riquelme 2018). Indeed, Villalobos-Parada et al. (2014) found that violence is more common towards pupils on SIPs.

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Autistic children constitute approximately 1% of all pupils registered with SEND (BCN 2018), although it should be noted there are issues with autism diagnosis in Chile due to varied screening practices and complex socio-economic factors (Eugenin et al. 2015). For these pupils, school professionals consider that they lack the competence needed to support their learning needs, leading to a tendency to shift responsibility for the pupils onto their families, especially when the pupils have high support needs (Cerreta 2018; Villegas Otárola, Simón Rueda, & Echeita Sarrionandia 2014). Studies focused on parental perspectives reveal a lack of availability of human and material resources in educational settings, and highlight the need for a better school-parent rapport in order to support autistic pupils and their families (Cerreta 2018; Villegas Otárola et al. 2014).

Meanwhile, little is known about the school experiences of autistic pupils in Chile from their own perspective or from the point of view of the pupils with SEND in general (López et al. 2014; Soto Riquelme 2018; Villalobos-Parada et al. 2014). Studies might rely on administrative data (Contreras et al. 2020), or aim to capture the experiences of young autistic individuals through the views of their parents and teachers only (Cerreta 2018). However, it seems axiomatic to assert that to understand the needs, interests and experiences of autistic pupils, it is necessary to consult with the young people themselves (Falkmer et al. 2012; Wood 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this small-scale study based in a state school in Chile was to address the following research question: what do autistic pupils on SIPs think could improve their mainstream school experience?

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from data gathered in a state school for pupils aged between 10 and 19 in Santiago, the capital of Chile, where the first named author had worked as a psychologist for three years. This exploratory case study proceeded on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Thomas 2017), only understandable from within (Smith 1987), with the aim of potentially discovering theory while information is being gathered (Yin 2003). The 'insider knowledge' of the first named author enabled not only purposive and convenience sampling (Thomas 2017), but for the data collection methods to be developed in a way suited to the dispositions and needs of the research participants (Goodall 2018; Wood 2018).

Participants were recruited via an invitation letter addressed to parents of autistic pupils which was attached to their child's school diary. To be included, participants had to be part of the SIP and have a diagnosis of autism or Asperger Syndrome. Initially, four autistic participants were recruited, aged between 10 and 11: all were male. Informed consent, including permission to video record, was obtained from the parents of the autistic pupils via the invitation letter and subsequent consent form. Assent was obtained from the autistic participants after they were shown a set of four, 40-second videos that presented the study in an accessible and concrete form. In addition, a 19-year-old pupil, also male - who was nearing the end of his school education, having been kept back a year due to identified language learning delays – expressed an interest in the study and so was recruited. An e-mail was sent to him directly with the invitation and consent form to fill in electronically. As part of a SIP, all of the participants had been evaluated by the school psychologist using the WISC-III, and had been found to fall with the average intelligence range. All participants were told that they could withdraw whenever they wanted without giving a reason.

The aim, in keeping with the case study approach, was to enable the exploration of the school experiences of the autistic pupils about their educational context, using a focus group format (Finch & Lewis 2003) and an online questionnaire (Morgan et al. 2002). The broader methods used, as well as participant details, are summarised in **Table 1** below.

One participant (Nahvel, aged 10), was not able to attend the focus group due to health issues. Therefore, the specialist SIP teacher completed the same activities of the focus group with him in the form of a semi-structured interview once he returned to school. Marco (aged 19) was also offered the possibility of an interview, but he preferred to complete the online questionnaire only. Pseudonyms, which were spontaneously chosen by four of the participants themselves when completing their consent forms, are used instead of all real names.

While the aim of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) was to capture aspects of the pupils' school experiences, which they could express independently while avoiding the influence of other participants (Morgan et al. 2002), the focus group/interview enabled more in-depth exploration of the same issues. Here, the emphasis was on the understandings and beliefs of the participants in relation to their education, identifying potential shared meanings, as well as the diversity of feelings and behaviours associated with their schooling (Byrne et al. 2016; Thomas 2017).

Table 1: Summary of participant details and data collection methods.

Pupil	Gender	Age		Diagnosis	School	Years in current school	Data collection method
		Now	When diagnosed				
Marco	M	19	7	Asperger		3	Online Questionnaire
Ikonik	M	11	8	Asperger		7	Online Questionnaire + Focus Group
Shongun	M	11	7	Autism	State A	5	
Guajari	M	10	8	Autism		7	
Nahvel	M	10	6	Asperger		7	Online Questionnaire + Interview

The questionnaire was piloted with a Chilean parent of an autistic child (who was not a participant in the study) and a young autistic adult studying autism and educational inclusion at postgraduate level in the UK. The focus group questions and format were developed with input from the specialist SIP teacher. The Finch and Lewis (2003) five-stage focus group process was followed, as illustrated in Appendix 2. Given that autistic individuals tend to prefer tangible and visual items (Dawson et al. 2007), concrete materials, such as cards, pictures, coloured pens and scissors, were incorporated. For example, as part of this process, the pupils were presented with a series of photos (Appendix 3) from which they were asked to identify their preferred classroom layout.

This approach was also intended to help to focus participants' attention (Finch & Lewis 2003) and give them space to think and more processing time (Morgan et al. 2002; Rajendran & Mitchell 2007). This also enabled the pupils to express themselves in alternative ways (e.g. drawing or constructing), free from the limitations of language (Kennedy, Kools & Krueger 2001), such as when they were asked to design their ideal classroom. Moreover, due to the participants' identified social communication and sensory issues, the small size of the focus group was considered advantageous to them.

The focus group took place in a resource room in the school. The specialist SIP teacher took on the role of the group moderator, while the first named author, located in the UK, acted as an observer and secondary moderator via Skype. The four youngest participants completed the questionnaire during school hours using the resource room or library computers, while Marco completed the questionnaire independently in his own time.

All the data were recorded, transcribed and translated from Spanish to English by the first named author, who is bilingual. The data were then analysed via thematic analysis by applying the six-phase process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006), which consisted of 1) becoming familiar with the data and seeking meanings and patterns 2) generating initial codes using Excel 3) developing broader themes to re-organise the identified codes using visual schemes and organising them into themes and sub-themes with coloured grids on Excel 4) reviewing the accuracy of themes 5) defining the themes and 6) producing the study report.

This process resulted in four, interlinked themes, which were 1) sensory issues (with sub-themes of 'noise', 'space' and 'textures') 2) safety 3) approaches to learning and 4) social interaction (with sub-themes of 'desire for social interaction' and 'difficulties with social interaction and need for support').

These themes and sub-themes will now be described and explicated, followed by a broader discussion of the core findings.

Findings
Sensory issues
Noise
During the focus group activities, in Nahvel's individual interview and in the questionnaire, participants provided their views on the physical environment of the classroom. Noise and clutter affected them significantly and could produce extreme reactions. For example, Shongun (aged 11) stated that he can get 'violent and can hit people' in disorganised and noisy environments and he considered that there is 'way too much noise' in his classroom. Similarly, Guajari (aged 10) commented that he feels 'nervous when our classroom is noisy and messy', while Nahvel stated that he likes going to the resource room to 'relax when I'm feeling stressed, because it stresses me to feel stressed.' Indeed, when asked if he liked to go to the resource room to get away from noise, he responded with an energetic 'yes, a thousand times yes!' Moreover, when deciding where their ideal classroom would be situated, the three focus group pupils and Nahvel chose isolated and calm places such as near the library or the SIP resource room. Ikonik (aged 11) also stated that he would prefer a classroom at the very end of the main courtyard that would be 'easy to find if I need to get away from the noise and mess.'

Space
In order to avoid the noise and general clutter of the classroom, it was important for the participants to have their own space and plenty of room in their learning environment. Shongun and Ikonik expressed the need for an alternative room separate to the main classroom and stated that the school resource room enabled them to relax, have a break, and de-stress. In the focus group, Guajari said he spends breaktimes in the library in order to be alone, while in his questionnaire, he asserted that it was important 'to have space to play.' Ikonik said that he preferred large courtyards in order 'to have space' and Nahvel suggested 'demolishing a wall and making the resource room a little bigger' so he could have a 'little more space to hang out.' Shongun also said that he could avoid getting 'very furious' if he had more access to a quiet space to relax in, while Nahvel said that he could recover from stress and exhaustion if he was able to retire to a tent within the classroom (as shown in classroom 4, Appendix 3), where he would 'go to sleep a little (…) calm down and rest a little.'

Textures
The participants considered the classroom chairs and floor to be uncomfortable. Ikonik and Nahvel recommended having soft chairs, like puffs, while Shongun spoke of bringing pillows from home to put on the chairs. The pupils also found the floor to be cold and said that they would love to have a carpet to sit on. According to Ikonik, for example, life

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at school would be easier if they 'didn't get cold after 15 minutes like our classroom floor', also stating that the carpet in classroom 4 (Appendix 3) 'looks soft, not like the one here.' This exchange between the pupils led the focus group moderator to comment that she finally understood why he would always prefer squatting on a chair or the floor rather than sitting on them. Another relaxation strategy offered by Nahvel was for the classroom to have a foam corner where pupils could go to sit and play with foam bricks.

According to these pupils, therefore, their ideal classroom would have carpets and alternative places to sit such as couches and puffs, and would be further softened by pillows. In addition, they would have the possibility of withdrawing, either within the classroom itself, or outside of it, in a quiet and calm space.

Safety

Sensory issues, questions of space and those relating to the form and contents of the classroom were also linked to the issue of safety, especially in connection with earthquakes, which are common in Chile (Gee & Leith 2011). The participants often mentioned this phenomenon while speaking of and creating their ideal classroom, moving swiftly from discussing issues of safety relating directly to the school that mattered to them individually, such as not having slippery surfaces in the playground (Nahvel), or chairs that are properly balanced (Shongun), to one common and shared concern, that of earthquakes. For example, Shongun stated that 'the most important thing' is for the teacher's desk to be near the door 'in case of an earthquake', while Ikonik added that the teacher has to be next to the door because 'you never know when one will start', indicating that it is the more unpredictable aspects of earthquakes which are an issue for him. Importantly, the participants recognised the need for others to be supported in these circumstances, stating, for example, that doors should be easy for those with disabilities or reduced mobility to open and shut, and that they should be sliding, and not get stuck.

These concerns also centred in part on the physical discomfort created by earthquake warnings, especially as Chilean schoolchildren are told to place themselves under their tables during strong tremors (Ministry of Health, Chile 2015). The pupils spoke of the need for a safe and comfortable classroom that was also prepared for an earthquake, and recommended having soft materials covering the metal parts of the chairs and tables to avoid getting hurt when moving quickly under the table or when trying to get to the door. This aspect was especially highlighted by Ikonik who found it difficult to follow this mandatory and essential instruction due to his sensory sensitivities, as he would often find it painful when reaching under the table (with the metal parts of the chairs and tables) and so would feel uncomfortable and cold sitting under it. To reduce the discomfort, Shongun suggested the option of having a mat or pillow under the tables which would enable them to feel secure and comfortable at the same time.

Approaches to learning

Participants also indicated the ways in which they considered they could learn and make academic progress more easily. For example, Marco (aged 19) asserted in his questionnaire the importance of teaching and evaluating in alternative ways in order to respond to the needs and learning styles of all pupils, stating that 'academically, pupils on the spectrum should be taught considering their learning styles and needs.' The value of teaching that takes into account the diversity of pupils' needs, learning rhythms and styles was also reinforced by Guajari and Ikonik, who agreed that for pupils who need more time, two whiteboards were necessary 'to have more space and for the teacher not to erase too quickly.'

At the same time, within the questionnaires, when indicating which aspects they least liked about their classes, all the participants pointed out that writing too much and theoretical classes were 'boring' (Shongun), had 'too much writing' (Guajari) and were 'hard to follow' (Marco). They also expressed a wish for classes which are more entertaining (Ikonik, Shongun, Nahvel) and 'more creative' (Nahvel). Similarly, within his questionnaire, Marco pointed out that he liked 'individual written activities and tests' where he would have 'the space and freedom' to express himself according to his interests.

Moreover, all participants, during the focus group, individual interview and questionnaire, referred to technology, such as interactive whiteboards and laptops, as useful and motivational tools. In addition, when they were asked to choose their favourite classroom amongst the five images presented, they all chose rooms that had technological materials within them (classrooms 1, 2, and 3; Appendix 3). Similarly, in the questionnaire, all participants indicated that they would appreciate greater use of computers and tablets in their lessons as they would enable them to tap into their areas of interest more easily. This included Guajari - a pupil usually described as demotivated in school – who stated that he wants to learn, but that he is unable to engage with current approaches and subjects. Moreover, one of the appeals of the resource room was not just that it offered a quiet space, but that it enabled the pupils to be on the computer and engaged in favourite activities such as playing Minecraft.

Social interaction

Desire for social interaction

It was clear that despite needing to withdraw from the classroom and spend time alone on occasions, the participants also enjoyed social interaction in school. For example, those who participated in the focus group activities said they preferred images of classrooms that had tables set up in groups (as shown in classrooms 1, 2, 3 and 4; Appendix 3)

unlike their own classroom, where the desks are all in rows (as shown in classroom 5; Appendix 3). Shongun said that in groups, 'we can all be a team' and 'make more group work.' This, he said, would differ from their own classroom, 'where we're all separated.' Additionally, within the individual questionnaires, the four younger pupils asserted that they wanted more teamwork and group activities during their lessons. Furthermore, when deciding where their ideal classroom would be situated, even though they chose quiet areas, they all wanted the windows to look towards the playground so they could decide whether to go out to play, depending on the activities.

It was also noticeable that when expressing their own preferences in relation to safety or approaches to learning, for example, all participants showed an awareness of and concern for the needs of other pupils, not just themselves. Moreover, when given the choice of creating their ideal classroom, they decided to design a classroom that included their 39 other classmates, demonstrating their interest in involving their peers, and not only those who use the resource room. Indeed, in his questionnaire, Nahvel's perception of 'entertaining classes' were those which included 'group work activities' where they can 'solve problems together.'

Difficulties with social interaction and need for support

Notwithstanding the preference for group activity expressed by most participants, they also revealed, as we have seen, a need for occasional space, either in or outside of the classroom, to diminish anxiety and avoid having meltdowns. Indeed, Ikonik quickly started questioning the efficacy of classroom layout in group form, especially during exams, when he said he would 'get distracted' and also feared that 'someone might want to look at my answers.' Similarly, Nahvel, who also preferred group tables, worried that during exams someone might 'break the rules' and try to copy from others. Moreover, when the three pupils in the focus group were asked to co-create their ideal classroom (**Figure 1**), they struggled to agree on their preferences and work together as a team. Even though they made efforts (Shongun tried to make them vote, by raising their hands, between puffs and chairs with cushions, for example), they each ended up creating their own, individual classroom. In addition, when choosing their favourite classroom within the five images, the pupils often referred to their 'style', saying 'this room is my style' (Guajari on classroom 3; Appendix 3), or 'No!! This one (…) is too infantile, it's not my style' (Shongun on classroom 1; Appendix 3), suggesting an individualism which could be at odds with group activity.

Moreover, Marco made it clear in his questionnaire that he did not enjoy group work and that he prefers to work alone, especially as he said he struggles 'to understand what others think and want.' Indeed, when asked within the questionnaire what he feels teachers and school staff should focus more on, Marco's only recommendation was to have social support workshops for those with SEND. However, he considered that these workshops should be with general classmates, and not with an external or exclusive group for pupils with SEND. This suggests that in Marco's case, he would like to interact socially and have better teamwork skills, but that he struggles in this area and needs support to
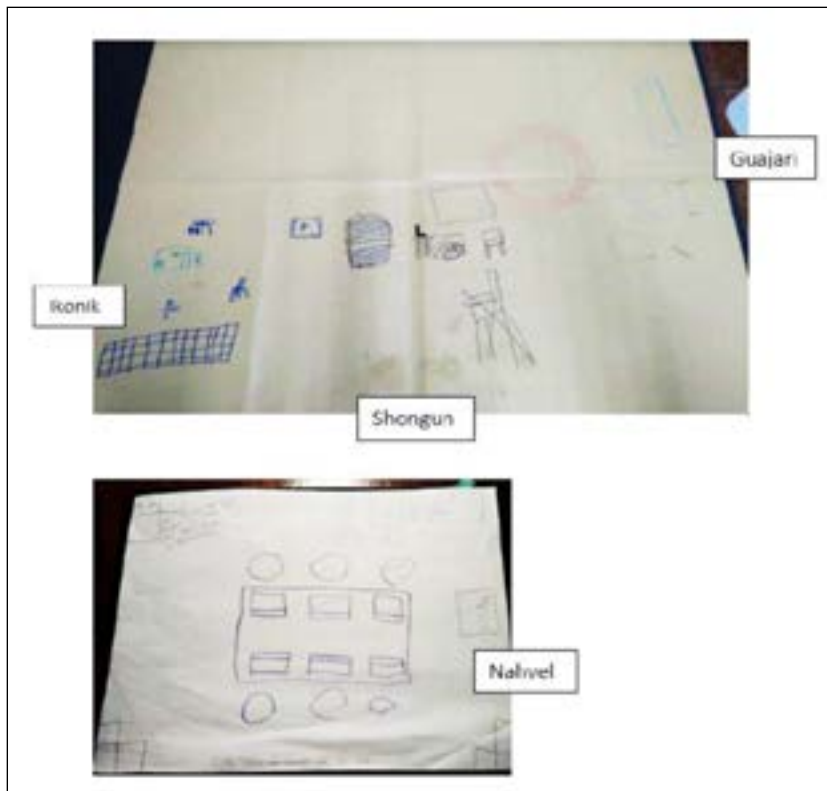

Figure 1: Representations of an 'ideal classroom' by Guajari, Ikonik, Nahvel and Shongun.

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achieve this. Tellingly, when Marco was asked what advice he would give younger autistic pupils, he replied that they should 'never shut down' and instead 'let out that young person that wants to meet friends and accomplish everything that you desire, and never let solitude win you.'

Discussion

This small group of autistic pupils from a school in Chile reveal the important insights that can be gained from engaging with children and young people directly on how to facilitate their own educational inclusion (Humphrey & Lewis 2008). Sensory issues emerged as a major factor in terms of their well-being and ability to cope with school, indicating the dangers of sensory as well as emotional overload when these predispositions are not suitably supported (Ashburner, Ziviani & Rodger 2008). Noise is revealed as a highly problematic issue that has been linked to high levels of distress, behavioural difficulties and educational exclusion for autistic children (Sainsbury 2009; Bogdashina 2016; Wood 2020). The issue of excessive noise has also been associated with difficulties in language processing for pupils with SEND (Klatte, Bergström & Lachmann 2013), and can have a negative impact on all pupils when the levels exceed recommended standards (Shield & Dockrell 2004). In this study, noise was also connected to the question of space, and the need for quiet places away from the usual classroom din to enable the pupils to relax and de-stress. Therefore, creating quiet spaces in schools could bring important benefits to autistic pupils (McAllister & Sloan 2016) and their peers (Woolner & Hall 2010).

The pupils in this study also identified the value of soft textures in their learning spaces (Bogdashina 2016), which contrasted with the cold, hard surfaces of their classroom and the potentially violent outbursts which can result from sensory distress. Given that hard surfaces tend to reflect more sound (Dockrell & Shield 2006), a clear need is indicated for softer surfaces in schools. Indeed, a reduction in noise, more space (or spaces to escape to) and softer textures were very much aligned for the younger participants in this study, suggesting that improvements in these areas could enable them not only to concentrate better, but to regulate their emotions (Ashburner, Ziviani & Rodger 2010) and even reach a state of flow (McDonnell & Milton 2014; Wood & Milton 2018).

Crucially, within the Chilean context, the autistic pupils felt strongly that their learning spaces should not only be comfortable, but as safe as possible and prepared for earthquakes, arguably the most destabilising situation commonly experienced in Chile (Gee & Leith 2011). Earthquakes are stressful for most people (Leiva-Bianchi 2011), but these findings imply they might be even more so for autistic individuals who, as well as potentially experiencing additional sensory discomfort in small shelter spaces, tend to have a higher intolerance of uncertainty (Wigham et al. 2014), and need predictability and sameness to control stress levels (Caldwell 2006). These findings suggest therefore the necessity for a better understanding of the impact of tremor alerts and events on autistic pupils who live in zones at high risk of earthquakes (Valenti et al. 2012), as well as of the staff who support them (Valenti et al. 2013).

While it would be difficult to generalise from this study on the form, content and nature of lessons in school which would enable autistic pupils to be more effectively included, the participants' comments nevertheless reveal that eliciting their views is a worthwhile process (Christensen & James 2017; Humphrey & Lewis 2008; Lewis 2001). Technology emerged as a potentially important tool to not only facilitate access, but to help with motivation and engagement (Fletcher-Watson 2014; Murray 1997; Murray & Lawson 2007). This in itself aligns with the growing body of research that supports the idea of an 'interest model' of autism (McDonnell & Milton 2014; Murray 2018), or 'monotropism' (Lawson 2011; Milton 2017; Murray, Lesser & Lawson 2005), whereby supporting the very intense interests of autistic pupils in their learning environment is shown to be largely beneficial (Gunn & Delafield-Butt 2016; Wood 2019).

The pupils in this study also revealed a desire for social interaction and kinship, in contrast to the commonly held view that autism is denoted by an inability to socialise (McConnell 2002). Here too, supporting the interests of autistic pupils has been shown to provide important benefits in terms of socialisation at school (Gunn & Delafield-Butt 2016), a phenomenon which extends into adulthood (Koenig & Williams 2017; Grove et al. 2018). Indeed, mutual interests, including computer games such as Minecraft, can enhance social relationships for those who find it difficult to interact in face-to-face situations, creating a safe space for autistic people to express themselves (Ringland et al. 2017; Zolyomi & Shmalz 2017). Furthermore, online social activities are unlikely to be complicated by concerns about rule-breaking, which can impact more on autistic young people than others (Bolling et al. 2011).

Moreover, Marco's heart-felt assertion that younger autistic pupils should not let solitude 'win' exemplifies both the problem of loneliness and the importance of social connections for many autistic people (Bauminger & Kasari 2003; Causton-Theoharis, Ashby & Cosier 2009), especially when their own social dispositions are enabled to flourish (Heasman & Gillespie 2018). Indeed, the pupils' concerns for the needs and safety of other pupils and the relatively high value placed on group activity – even if this was also found to be problematic – underscores the fact that contrary to received ideas, autistic children do not lack empathy (McAllister & Sloan 2016; Milton 2012). Therefore, even if autistic pupils require support to socialise (Locke et al. 2010; White & Roberson-Nay 2009), and occasionally need to withdraw to quiet spaces, the assumption should not be made that they lack social needs (Causton-Theoharis et al. 2009).

Conclusion

In Chile, important steps have been taken over recent years to facilitate the educational inclusion of pupils with SEND and to enable a more diverse school population (Mineduc 1990; 1998; 2009). However, the SIP programme, which was intended to support these changes, has only been partially successful, as it has been associated with internal forms of

stigmatisation, segregation and discrimination (Cornejo-Valderrama, 2017; Mellado Hernádez 2017) and poor planning for longer-term outcomes (Manosalva Mena, Mansilla de Larraechea and Olmos Ortiz 2011). Indeed, inclusion is still perceived as optional for some schools (López et al. 2014), and dominated by a fear that pupils with SEND might drag down the overall standards of the school (Cerreta 2018; López et al. 2014; Mellado Hernández et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, even if well-intentioned staff fear they lack the necessary knowledge and training to support pupils with SEND (Sanhueza Henríquez et al. 2013; San Martín et al. 2017), especially those who are autistic (Cerreta 2018; Villegas Otárola et al. 2014), a strong programme of inclusion has been shown to reduce any negative effects, should they exist from an academic perspective, of the presence of pupils with SEND (Contreras et al. 2020). The findings from this study also provide an important indicator of the value of engaging directly with pupils on SIP programmes and, as far as autistic children and young people are concerned, of supporting their sensory, emotional and social needs in school. Future, larger scale studies, incorporating autistic children and young people with diverse communication styles, could therefore provide essential insights which could be applied more generally to education settings in Chile.

Particular attention should be paid to the impact of earthquake tremors on autistic children and young people, not only in Chile, but in other at-risk areas (Valenti et al. 2012). In addition, notwithstanding the socio-economic pressures faced by Chile which impact on schools (Santiago et al. 2017), more resources are needed to enable schools to carry out the necessary planning and supervision (Cerreta 2018), to develop better school/parent relationships (Sanhueza Henríquez et al. 2013; Villegas Otárola et al. 2014) and engagement with the local community (Poblete-Christie, López & Muñoz 2019). Moreover, given that there is a clear need for much more research into the perspectives of autistic pupils in schools in Chile, as well as those with other areas of SEND (López et al. 2014), we suggest that in tandem with the 'top down' approach from government, autistic children and young people should be provided with a say on the design and layout of their learning environment (McAllister & Sloan 2016; Scott 2011). Ultimately, it is only by empowering autistic pupils through flexible and participatory approaches that the elusive goal of educational inclusion in Chile can hope to be realised.

Additional Files
The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix 1.** Questionnaire. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.724.s1
- **Appendix 2.** Focus group activity based on Finch and Lewis (2003) five stage process. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.724.s2
- **Appendix 3.** Images shown to participants of different classroom layouts. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.724.s3

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Neither author has any competing interests in connection with this study.

Author Contribution
Both Olivia Eguiguren Istuany and Rebecca Wood contributed equally to this article.

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