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Yiyi Teng,
Shanghai Pudong Vocational and Technical
College, China

*CORRESPONDENCE

Claudia Carrasco-Aguilar
✉ claudia.carrasco@upla.cl

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Qualitative evaluation of the feasibility of a national whole-school program for reducing school violence and improving school climate in Chile

Verónica López¹, Claudia Carrasco-Aguilar^{2*}, Pamela Jervis³,
Javier Torres-Vallejos⁴, María Teresa Ramírez⁵,
Juan Pablo Álvarez González⁵ and Amanda Franulic¹

¹Escuela de Psicología, Centro de Investigación para la Educación Inclusiva, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Valparaíso, Chile, ²Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Playa Ancha, Valparaíso, Chile, ³Department of Industrial Engineering University of Chile, Institute for Research in Market Imperfections and Public Policy, Institute for Fiscal Studies, Santiago, Chile, ⁴Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Comunicaciones, Universidad Santo Tomas, Santiago, Chile, ⁵Ministerio de Educación de Chile, Santiago, Chile

Introduction: Globally, school violence has increased since the return to in-person classes following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Since then, this indicator has become critical, especially in Latin American countries. In this context, the Chilean Ministry of Education, with the support of 17 universities, began in 2022 the design and implementation of a comprehensive educational reactivation policy. This policy included a focus on school climate (*convivencia escolar*) and mental health through a nationwide intervention program now called the Learning to Live Together Program (*Programa A Convivir se Aprende*), designed using a whole-school approach.

Methods: This study presents the results of a large-scale qualitative evaluation of the initial feasibility of the program, framed in a mixed-methods design. The evaluation identified schools with high, intermediate, and low initial acceptability of the program through 66 interviews and focus groups with 215 participants, including school members, representatives from the Ministry of Education, and university advisors.

Results: The reflexive thematic analysis identified four categories featuring six dimensions, 95 codes, and 3,040 textual quotes. The results show a positive acceptance of the program, with high adherence and commitment from the schools. The most highly valued aspects of the program were the conceptual model based on a whole-school approach, the possibility of working with universities in their territories, and school climate networks that were viewed as professional learning communities. Recommendations for future implementation of the program relate to longer implementation time, incorporating actions to promote mental health, expanding participation in the management of school climate, and greater presence of the ministry.

Discussion: We discuss these findings in relation to the program's theory of change, suggesting that the program can achieve its goal of improving school staffs' skills and competencies in managing school climate and reducing school violence, especially through the strategy of school climate networks by means of capacity building, shared reflexive processes, and emphasis on data-driven decision making.

KEYWORDS

qualitative, evaluation, postpandemic, school violence, school climate

1 Introduction

Globally, many advances in access, quality, and educational equity were lost during social distancing measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19, negatively affecting students' mental health and motivation (Gomes and Sousa, 2023; Källmen and Hallgren, 2024). Consequently, many students and their families had high expectations regarding the return to classes (Fervers et al., 2023; Gardiner-Smith and Jackson, 2024), although school adaptation was very challenging for children, their families, teachers, and management teams (Lourenço et al., 2021; Pediconi et al., 2023; Orgilés et al., 2024).

Amid this upheaval, various studies have shown an increase in school victimization among students and violence experienced by teachers in the period following the return to classes (Anderman et al., 2024; Patte et al., 2024). Additionally, evidence suggests increased anxiety levels and the prevalence of bullying after in-person classes resumed (Forsberg and Thorvaldsen, 2022; Da et al., 2023). As a result, different countries have developed strategies and programs to prevent school violence.

This study analyzed the implementation experience of the (originally named) Territorial Program for School Climate and Crisis Management, currently known as the Learning to Live Together Program (in Spanish, *Programa A Convivir se Aprende*, or ACSA), in Chile in 2022. This research explored the collective meanings of multiple educational actors involved in the process to understand the feasibility of its implementation and factors that facilitated or hindered its implementation.

1.1 Psychosocial effects of the pandemic on educational communities in Latin America and Chile

Latin America and the Caribbean experienced one of the longest lockdowns, with 29 weeks of entirely remote education (UNESCO, 2024), exacerbating the increase in school violence since the return to in-person classes (Morales et al., 2023) and the deterioration of mental health during and after the pandemic (Lizana and Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2023). As in-person classes resumed, countries like Mexico and Brazil experienced a significant rise in school violence (De Souza and Levandoski, 2022; Morales et al., 2023), compounded by an increase in gender-based violence and domestic violence (Malta et al., 2021; Moreno Mosquera et al., 2021) and a high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress symptoms among adolescents (Cañón Buitrago et al., 2021), particularly affecting the most marginalized groups (Ribeiro et al., 2023).

During the lockdown, studies in Mexico and Chile showed effects on the stress and mental health of teachers (Lizana and Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2023), contributing to a widespread climate of fear and insecurity since the return to in-person classes. This may compromise learning environments and jeopardize the quality of educational systems (López et al., 2022; McMahon et al., 2022). In Chile, the increase in school violence has been confirmed by the Superintendency of Education, the agency responsible for educational oversight, which has reported a significant rise in the number of complaints in this area (Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2022). Additionally, various studies have concluded that Chilean students are more irritable and have experienced negative

changes, whereas teachers have been highly concerned about their personal health and emotional well-being and that of their families and students (López et al., 2021b; Ponce et al., 2021). In the same vein, Chilean teachers have reported the highest levels of distress in Latin America due to the wide gap in support and working conditions necessary to carry out their work during the pandemic (de Oliveira et al., 2021; Ramos-Huenteo et al., 2020). Despite this, schools in Chile always sought ways to maintain the continuity of the educational process, with a high concern for the well-being of school communities (López et al., 2022).

Since 2022, the return to in-person classes has involved having many students in classrooms continuously with an 8-h school day, an abrupt change for most schools (López et al., 2022). These changes have had significant implications for school climate, with various socially significant incidents that continue to be highly publicized in media outlets in the country (e.g., Araya, 2022).

1.2 Whole-school approach for the prevention of school violence

This scenario has led to the development of various governmental initiatives aimed at reducing these negative indicators. Under the principle of evidence-based programs, the Chilean Ministry of Education, with the support of the country's universities, designed a program conceptually guided by the whole-school approach (WSA) now known as ACSA. Its objective is to "develop competencies and skills to address and prevent school violence, as well as to promote school climate among management teams at the level of school administrators and educational establishments in targeted municipalities of the country" (Ministry of Education, 2022, p. 1). This study was a qualitative evaluation of the initial implementation of the program in 2022.

To address school violence effectively, emerging literature has emphasized the need for interventions based on a WSA (Nyoni et al., 2023). This approach focuses on children and youth, their families, teachers, school support staff, and the entire educational community, even suggesting the inclusion of broader local communities (Weare and Nind, 2011). It is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and considers school violence as a multifactorial phenomenon manifested through an interactive continuum of systems that influence students' development and social relationships. It proposes that interventions occur at multiple levels of action and scope in terms of coverage and intensity, spanning strategies and educational actors (Hornby, 2016). International organizations such as the World Health Organization and Schools for Health in Europe have supported the concept of the "health-promoting school," which is based on the holistic model of the WSA for the social and emotional development of students (King, 2023; Reiss et al., 2023).

However, the effectiveness of such interventions is not yet fully demonstrated (Valle et al., 2020). Some interventions based on this approach in the pandemic and postpandemic context would have had better results if the entire school community had effectively participated (Rahm et al., 2024), because changing the ethics and governance structure of an educational institution is a necessary goal for truly adhering to the principles of the WSA (Müller et al., 2022). According to UNESCO (2020), this is largely because it is often

difficult to recognize that schools are part of a broader system influenced by society. Nonetheless, a meta-analysis by [Goldberg et al. \(2019\)](#) indicated that although the impact of interventions under this modality remains unclear, findings indicated small but significant positive results for students' social and emotional adjustment, behavioral adjustment, and internalizing symptoms.

The literature asserts that the effectiveness of the WSA in addressing school violence requires the participation of families and community members, an adequate understanding of the approach, commitment, continuous and reflective collaboration among school staff members, sufficient time, effective leadership, and a school culture that promotes innovation. Additionally, firm and clear policies, strong organizational structures, and systematic and continuous procedures over time are essential ([Nyoni et al., 2023](#); [Pearce et al., 2024](#)).

1.3 Large-scale intervention in Chile to prevent postpandemic school violence

Chile has faced multiple emergencies and disasters that have generated various social and mental health impacts ([De la Barra and Silva, 2010](#)). A psychosocial strategy based on crisis intervention and education in emergencies ([Parra-Zapata and Villa-Ochoa, 2023](#)) has been effective in safeguarding educational trajectories and protecting the mental health of educational communities, mobilizing the community's resources to address the consequences of current scenarios ([Ministry of Health, 2011](#); [Universidad de Chile, 2020](#)). Therefore, in March 2020, the COVID-19 Social Roundtable was established, composed of various experts from the scientific, political, and social sectors ([Ministry of Health, 2022](#)). An interuniversity team emerged that made proposals to the educational system at different levels to promote well-being and address the health crisis. These proposals were based on the WSA and school counseling guidelines, following the recommendations of the World Health Organization and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee ([Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and Universidad de Chile, 2020](#)). This strategy included a level of promotion and primary prevention, meaning actions intended for everyone to reinforce protective factors and reduce risk factors; targeting or secondary prevention for some, with specific strategies for groups that have shown some challenges; and tertiary prevention or individual care for cases that have not responded to actions at the previous levels and therefore, require specialized professional support ([Dimmit and Robillard, 2014](#); [Espelage and Swearer, 2023](#)).

In Chile, this model has been used by governmental educational programs ([Murphy et al., 2017](#)), although the country continues to face barriers to achieving success with the WSA. These barriers are related to the lack of effective leadership from local collaborations and a school culture that addresses targeted interventions with a punitive and exclusionary approach ([Ascorra et al., 2021](#); [López et al., 2023](#)).

The proposals derived from the advisory bodies organized by the [Ministry of Education \(2023b\)](#) during the return to in-person schooling in 2022 strengthened the design of the comprehensive educational reactivation policy ([Ministry of Education, 2024a](#)). However, its implementation was delayed, resulting in an abrupt return to in-person classes in 2021 ([López et al., 2022](#)), which brought negative consequences in terms of violence and mental health in

schools. Not until 2022 did the ministry design and implement a school climate and mental health intervention through ACSA.¹

1.4 Conceptual framework of the ACSA program

The Chilean Ministry of Education has led and promoted the National School Climate Policy (*Política Nacional de Convivencia Escolar*) since 2002, with a recent update in 2024. The objective is to transform educational school climate in schools progressively, focusing on reflective processes and management. The updated policy emphasizes four objectives: valuing school climate as a teachable and learnable process, building ways of living together based on care and inclusion, strengthening school climate management, and developing learning contexts founded on care and inclusion.

The *Seamos Comunidad* Educational Reactivation Plan, implemented in 2022 and planned until 2025, addresses the urgent socioemotional and school climate dimensions in educational communities, emphasizing the profound transformations needed in the education system. One of the plan's key areas is school climate and mental health, which seeks to address these aspects comprehensively by relying on the National School Climate Policy and complementing it with proposals from the COVID-19 Social Roundtable.

In the Reactivating Education Plan's school climate and mental health axis, the multilevel whole-school model has been adopted—a theoretical–practical framework prescribing structures, components, and actors involved in the effective management of school climate and mental health. This model is based on international conceptual frameworks that theoretically emphasize and empirically justify the need for WSA. Identified in international literature as “whole-school approaches” ([Gaffney et al., 2021](#)), “school-wide approaches” ([Mayer et al., 2021](#)), or “comprehensive school approaches” ([Bradshaw et al., 2021](#)), these strategies highlight the importance of tailoring educational goals, content, and activities to address the unique characteristics of each educational community precisely, defined in its sociohistorical and territorial context.

As previously mentioned, this approach is based on Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory. This approach is also supported by implementation theories ([Sanetti et al., 2014](#); [Weiner et al., 2017](#)), which emphasize the importance of adapting interventions to the local context. Furthermore, the scalability and intensity of interventions are adjusted based on identified needs, and school climate is addressed not only as a means to reduce conflicts but also as an educational goal that fosters citizenship and social cohesion. Hence, the core principles of the model are (a) inclusion: promoting respectful and equitable interactions; (b) collective care: fostering emotional and psychosocial well-being; (c) democratic participation: involving the school community in managing school climate and

¹ As part of the Reactivating Education Plan (*Plan de Reactivación Educativa*), the Ministry of Education carried out interventions in four areas: (a) school climate, well-being, and mental health; (b) strengthening and activation of learning; (c) re-engagement and guarantee of educational trajectories; and (d) digital transformation and connectivity. The ACSA program is one of the main interventions of the first area.

preventing school violence; (d) territorial approach: adapting interventions to the sociohistorical context and local needs; and (e) multitiered: underscoring the importance of managing school climate and preventing school violence in three tiers. These tiers are: (1) promotional and universal: preventive measures to anticipate issues; (2) focused group interventions: targeted support for groups requiring additional assistance; and (3) individual interventions: specialized interventions for specific students or situations in coordination with support networks in the local health system and community (see Figure 1).

Tier 1 involves pedagogical actions for all members of the educational community, focusing on the promotion of well-being. These actions aim to foster the development of socioemotional and school climate skills among students and adults in the school community, integrating these elements across the curriculum and in the school climate management plan. It is characterized by its promotional and pedagogical nature, offering universal coverage by engaging the entire school community, particularly teachers and students. It also involves engaging families and the broader community in actions which are high in coverage and low intensity. Level 1 also includes screening strategies to identify support needs in conflict resolution and socioemotional skill development across grade levels and educational stages.

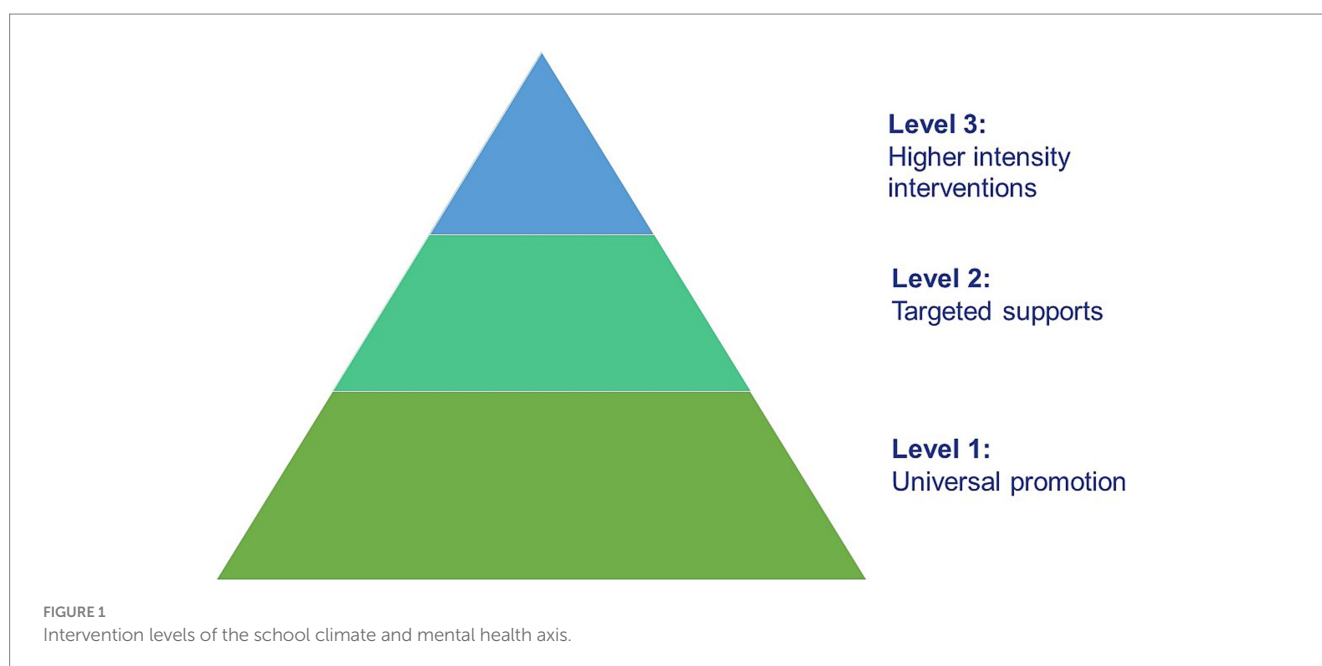
Building on the strategies introduced at Tier 1, Tier 2 provides targeted support by working with smaller groups to develop specific socioemotional skills and conflict resolution strategies. These groups are identified during Tier 1 as being at risk of difficulties in conflict resolution or requiring additional socioemotional skill development due to their developmental stage or prior circumstances. Actions at this level are generally group-focused, providing lower coverage but greater intensity compared to Tier 1 interventions.

Tier 3 focuses on individuals who, despite having participated in the previous levels, still require specialized interventions. These actions are individualized, characterized by low coverage but high intensity in terms of the time and resources required from school

climate teams and the potential impact on the students involved. This level includes referral strategies to intersectoral networks and the application of individual disciplinary measures for students, in accordance with the school's internal school climate regulations and action protocols, which must adhere to current laws and regulations.

The program aims to strengthen the skills and competencies of school management and school climate teams (Ministry of Education, 2023a). One key feature of this public program is its implementation by universities across the country, focusing on selected municipalities based on specific criteria, such as complaints filed with the Superintendency of Education, input from the Ministry's Regional School Climate Coordinators, and recent incidents related to school violence. Participation in the program by each municipality and its educational institutions spans 2 years and is divided into two distinct phases: (a) the initial phase (year 1), which focuses on enabling educational communities to conduct a comprehensive diagnosis of school climate and well-being by identifying strengths, challenges, and opportunities for improvement, guided by the implementation of the WSA; and (b) the continuation phase (year 2), which allows institutions to explore in greater depth the specific topics identified during the diagnostic phase, working toward concrete improvements in practices and management tools in educational communities.

Figure 2 illustrates the program's theory of change (ToC). The causal logic underpinning this ToC suggests that by fostering collaborative networks, implementing training and accompaniment strategies, and promoting attitudinal and cultural changes in educational communities, it is possible to reduce school violence, improve school climate, and enhance socioemotional and educational development. This is achieved through the development of school staff's skills and competencies to manage school climate effectively from a WSA perspective. The specific school staff's skills and competencies that the program aims to improve are knowledge of strategies and actions to reduce school violence and improve school climate, aligned with the multitiered WSA; skills for organizational diagnosis and development; skills for putting into practice distributed



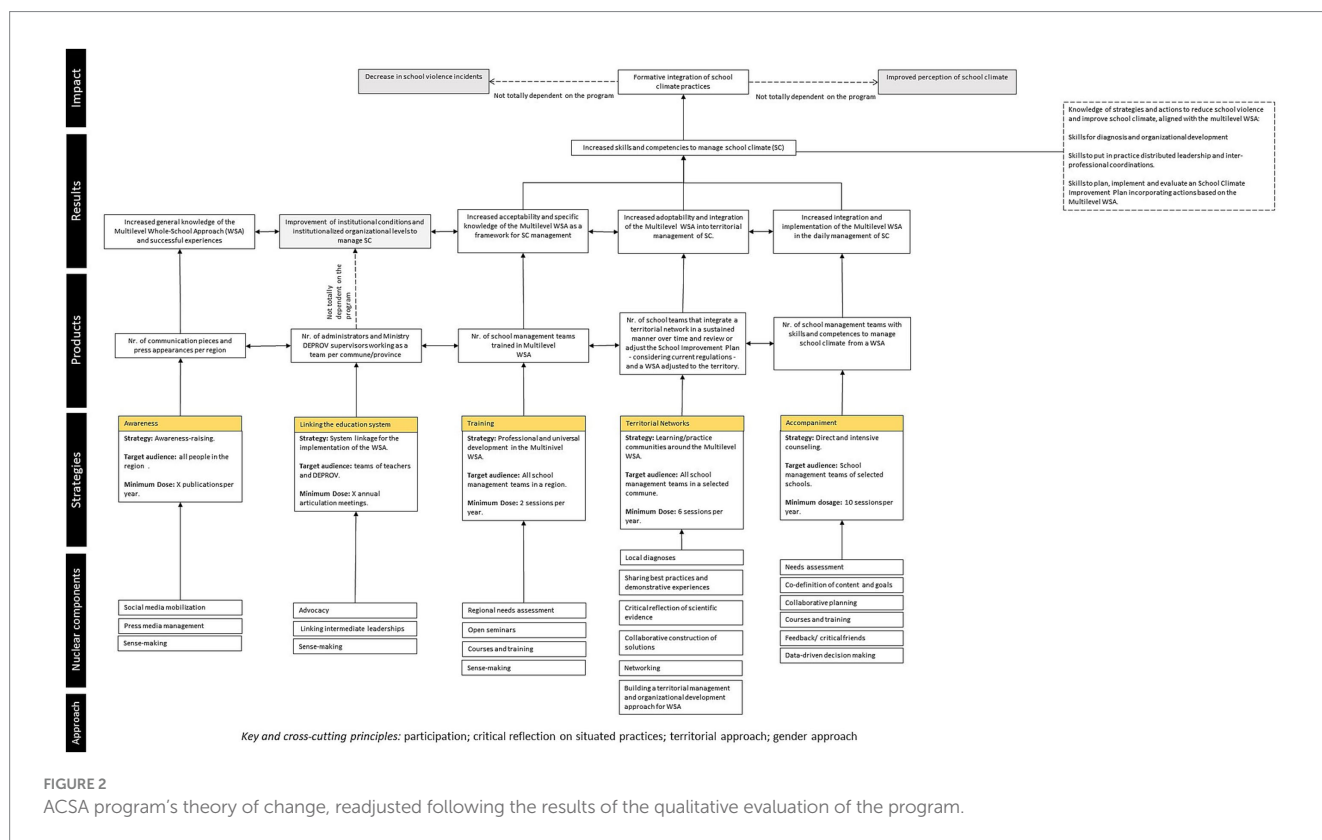


FIGURE 2 ACSA program's theory of change, readjusted following the results of the qualitative evaluation of the program.

leadership and interprofessional coordination; and skills to plan, implement, and evaluate a school climate improvement plan by incorporating actions based on the multilevel WSA.

To achieve this, the program operates under key assumptions, including the importance of fostering active and coordinated participation among all educational stakeholders, ensuring interventions are adaptable to local characteristics for greater effectiveness, and maintaining continuity across the phases of diagnosis, implementation, and evaluation to guarantee sustainable impact. In the long term, the program aims to reduce violence, improve school coexistence, strengthen socioemotional competencies among students and teachers, and contribute to the development of resilient and democratic school communities. Based on this ToC, the program includes three main components focused on developing the skills and competencies of participating schools and two additional components aimed at raising awareness in the broader community and strengthening the technical capacities of Ministry of Education staff members at regional and provincial levels. The three main components are as follows.

1.4.1 Territorial networks

Theoretically conceptualized as professional learning communities (Louis and Leithwood, 2021), these are networks of school-level school climate coordinators and school management staff members grouped by commune. The aim of these collective meetings is to strengthen collaboration among educational institutions in the municipality by sharing diagnoses, strategies, and intervention designs related to school violence and climate. The network is managed by regional and provincial teams from the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the contracted university.

1.4.2 Accompaniment

Theoretically framed as university-based technical assistance (Scott et al., 2022), this approach offers a personalized and practical method to support the implementation of innovations and enhance the skills of organizations and communities by developing solutions to specific challenges (Scott et al., 2022). Technical assistance for schools is designed to foster communication and facilitate school improvement processes that require organizational enhancements by establishing reflexive action communities and promoting effective strategies to achieve academic and socioemotional goals (Katz and Wandersman, 2016; Mayer et al., 2021). This aligns conceptually with the co-creation model, because recipients participate in the planning and implementation phases. This approach leads to contextualized practices adapted to the specific environment and developed during the process (Metz and Albers, 2014; Yazejian et al., 2019). In the ACSA model, the accompaniment component involves focused support provided by contracted universities to schools that need additional assistance to achieve the program's objectives. The provincial-level Ministry of Education, in collaboration with school administrators, identifies schools that could benefit from targeted support from the implementing universities, maintaining the principle of voluntariness. These schools receive on-site visits from the university team up to 10 times throughout the year.

1.4.3 Training

Rooted in the theoretical framework of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 2001) and supported by evidence that training teachers and school staff members in school climate promotion and violence prevention is associated with reduced peer victimization (Morales et al., 2014) and improved perceptions of school climate

(López et al., 2023), this component features workshops and sessions on topics related to school climate and educational well-being. These activities are designed for teachers, school climate teams, psychosocial support professionals, and educational assistants. The themes and target participants for these activities are determined collaboratively with the networks and are supported by multimedia resources, which are part of a publicly accessible online curriculum on the WSA (available for free at <https://convivenciaparaciudadania.mineduc.cl/escuela-total/>). The management of these activities is a shared responsibility between the university and the regional counterpart of the Regional Ministerial Secretariat, which may incorporate the multimedia resources into the training services.

The initial phase of the program was carried out between July and December 2022 in 3,888 schools across 60 municipalities, through a collaboration between the Ministry of Education and 17 public and private universities from northern, central, and southern Chile. In all components, the universities adhered to the Ministry of Education's guidelines. Furthermore, the intervention teams were required to hold regular meetings and receive support from the ministry to ensure effective implementation of actions.

To evaluate the program, the Ministry of Education convened a technical working group (*Mesa Técnica de Evaluación*), bringing together academics from the participating universities to develop technical recommendations for designing the evaluations. This working table proposed a first phase centered on the evaluation of the feasibility of a large-scale national WSA program through a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, whose quantitative findings have recently been reported (Rojas-Andrade et al., 2024). This study presents the results of the qualitative phase of the mixed-methods evaluation of the feasibility of the program after the first 6-month phase of the program's implementation, aiming to provide empirical evidence regarding the feasibility conditions of large-scale implementations at the international level to prevent school violence and promote positive school climates based on the WSA through the perspective of the school staff, the regional and province-level Ministry of Education, and university technical teams that participated in the first year of implementation of the ACSA.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research design

This study presents the results of a qualitative evaluation of the ACSA program. The general objective of this study was to analyze the perceptions and meanings of educational stakeholders involved in the initial implementation of the ACSA regarding its feasibility. To achieve this, the specific objectives aimed to identify and describe dimensions such as initial expectations and program setup, experiences that educational stakeholders considered as facilitators and barriers during the initiation and implementation process, lessons learned from this experience in terms of achievements, and recommendations for improving future versions of the program. This evaluation was requested by the ministry to make decisions to improve the program's implementation. The overall study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2020), and the results of the quantitative phase are published elsewhere (Rojas-Andrade et al., 2024).

The combination of quantitative and qualitative research strategies has been highlighted in the literature as a way to characterize the impacts of a strategy while also understanding beliefs, values, opinions, meanings, and modes of action among both external and internal users (Bedregal et al., 2017; Jacques-Aviñó et al., 2019). This design was chosen because impact evaluations of large-scale policies and programs with only quantitative approaches are insufficient. A qualitative approach can reveal the adaptation process of projects in much detail, highlighting aspects to be improved and resulting lessons (Carrasco-Aguilar et al., 2018; Calvo et al., 2021; Sierras-Davó et al., 2021).

2.2 Sampling, participants, and data collection strategy

Because this mixed-methods study began with a quantitative phase and ended with a qualitative phase, it was necessary to wait for the results of the first phase to advance the sampling for the qualitative evaluation of feasibility. As reported in Rojas-Andrade et al. (2024), the quantitative phase involved administering a survey to 1,561 people from 783 schools that measured feasibility, acceptability, and appropriateness at the beginning of the program. At the end, this survey was administered again, complemented by an instrument measuring perceptions of results. The qualitative phase built on the results of the first phase, which identified three clusters of schools in terms of their perceptions of the program. Using Stata 15, a hierarchical k-means cluster analysis with complete linkage method for continuous values and Euclidean distance measure was performed. In this statistical analysis, the unit of analysis was the school and the variables were the framing elements mentioned earlier. Using the Calinski-Harabasz criterion and graphical analysis of the dendrogram, three clusters were identified.

Cluster 1 had the highest values, followed by Cluster 2, in terms of the acceptability, appropriability, and feasibility of the program and a greater understanding of the program. Cluster 3 had lower values across all variables compared to Clusters 1 and 2. Based on these results, for the qualitative evaluation, schools closest to the centroid of each cluster were selected, aiming for diversity in terms of geographical location (north, center, and south of Chile) and the size of each municipality. Table 1 shows the variables used to identify the three clusters and the values of each cluster for these dimensions.

The participants in the qualitative evaluation included both internal and external users (Jacques-Aviñó et al., 2019), meaning those who designed and implemented the program and those who experienced the intervention. Among the internal users were university advisors and local representatives of the Ministry of Education, whereas external users were members of school management teams. Once the schools and municipalities in the study group were identified, an open invitation to participate was extended. Using volunteer sampling (Patton, 2015), the selection process began for the schools in each cluster, organized by region. Subsequently, local ministry representatives in the geographic sectors of these schools and university advisors were invited to participate. A total of 215 individuals participated (81 men and 134 women), including 63 members of school communities organized into 24 focus groups, 46 representatives from the Ministry of Education who took part in 9 individual interviews and 8 focus

TABLE 1 Minimum and maximum mean of variables used in cluster analyses.

Variables	Cluster 1			Cluster 2			Cluster 3		
	<i>n</i> = 290 (38%)			<i>n</i> = 166 (22%)			<i>n</i> = 307 (40%)		
	Min	<i>M</i>	Max	Min	<i>M</i>	Max	Min	<i>M</i>	Max
Appropriability	0.20	0.92	1.00	0.40	0.74	1.00	0.45	0.84	1.00
Feasibility	0.20	0.89	1.00	0.45	0.71	1.00	0.20	0.80	1.00
Acceptability	0.20	0.93	1.00	0.40	0.76	1.00	0.20	0.86	1.00
Comprehensibility	0.30	0.77	1.00	0.00	0.40	1.00	0.10	0.58	1.00
Importance of implementation	0.70	0.93	1.00	0.00	0.56	1.00	0.50	0.79	1.00
Readiness for implementation	0.20	0.76	1.00	0.00	0.40	0.90	0.10	0.57	1.00
Belief in program success	0.40	0.84	1.00	0.00	0.45	0.80	0.10	0.63	1.00
Belief in program effectiveness	0.50	0.85	1.00	0.00	0.46	0.70	0.30	0.65	1.00

TABLE 2 Proportion of information collection participants and strategies per cluster.

Cluster	Total		Individual interviews		Focus groups		Schools		Regional ministry		Universities	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1	24	36.36	5	7.58	19	28.79	8	12.12	7	10.61	9	13.64
2	23	34.85	2	3.03	21	31.82	8	12.12	7	10.61	8	12.12
3	19	28.79	2	3.03	17	25.76	8	12.12	6	9.09	5	7.58
Total	66	100.00	9	13.64	57	86.36	24	36.36	20	30.30	22	33.33

TABLE 3 Characteristics of participants.

Participants	School members	Regional ministry representatives	University members	Total
Administrators	24	–	–	24
Teachers	15	41	29	85
Nonteaching professionals	22	5	72	99
Nonprofessional support staff	2	0	5	7
Total	63	46	106	215

groups, and 106 university advisors who participated in 25 focus groups. Table 2 shows the proportion of information collection participants and strategies per cluster and Table 3 presents the characteristics of participants.

As shown in Table 2, the study involved 24 schools. The selection process aimed to ensure that the schools represented different categories (very small, small, medium, and large), as classified by the Chilean Ministry of Education for organizing technical assistance. Schools were chosen near the centroid of each cluster, ensuring representativeness of each group based on their central characteristics. Although many schools were invited to participate, only 24 agreed and met the criteria for inclusion. This approach ensured diversity across school types and provided a robust foundation for analyzing the initial implementation of the ACSA program. However, the limitations introduced by the voluntary nature of participation may have influenced the inclusion of schools with specific contexts or dynamics.

Despite this, the sample reflects the structural diversity of schools participating in the program.

Nine in-depth individual interviews and 57 focus groups were conducted. Individual interviews allow access to subjective experiences through the personal meanings of individuals (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2020), whereas focus groups allow access to shared experiences and negotiated meanings (Canales, 2006). The choice of strategy was determined by the availability of and access to participants, depending on the response to the call for participation. In both cases, questions were asked about the dimensions of the feasibility survey from the quantitative phase—initial expectations, acceptability, and feasibility of the program—along with facilitators, barriers, resistance, achievements, or positive evaluations related to the program; general recommendations; and specific recommendations for future program implementation. To ensure equitable participation in the focus groups, moderators used a

structured guide with open-ended questions to encourage reflection and ensure that all participants had the opportunity to contribute. Speaking times were managed to maintain balance and prevent any single participant from dominating the discussion. Additionally, ground rules were established at the beginning of each session to promote mutual respect, active listening, and a safe environment for sharing opinions, even if they differed. In the few instances where significant differences of opinion arose, moderators facilitated the dialogue by inviting participants to reflect on commonalities and consider how experiences might vary based on their roles or educational contexts.

2.3 Analysis strategy

Both individual interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and organized by cluster as a multiple case study (Stake, 2006). A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2021) was subsequently conducted with the support of ATLAS.ti version 23 (Soratto et al., 2020). This approach was chosen for its ability to capture both shared and subjective meanings, aligning with the study's objectives. The analysis followed six phases: inductive coding and creation of a code glossary, contrast and consolidation of codes, full coding and assignment to specific dimensions, reorganization into thematic categories, selection of the most relevant information, and final validation.

The process began with emergent, inductive coding using a subset of data from each cluster (one focus group for each type of internal and external user). Three team members were responsible for this initial phase, following a reflexive approach. Each coder named and defined the emerging codes, creating a shared glossary in ATLAS.ti to ensure conceptual clarity. During this phase, the focus was on identifying relevant themes without imposing preexisting categories. After the initial coding, the team convened to discuss the generated codes. These meetings, facilitated by the principal investigators, allowed the identification of significant thematic similarities between codes. As a result, some codes were renamed and grouped under more representative terms, ensuring consistency and conceptual rigor. This process reflected an iterative approach to internal triangulation, where collaborative discussions strengthened interpretive validity. With the initial set of codes agreed upon, the coders analyzed the remaining qualitative material, applying the revised codes and adding new ones as they emerged. Once exhaustive coding was complete, the codes were assigned to six predefined dimensions aligned with the study's specific objectives: (a) initial expectations, (b) facilitators, (c) barriers, (d) program achievements, (e) general recommendations, and (f) specific recommendations. These dimensions provided a framework for organizing the findings according to the main areas of interest for the evaluation. After coding and organizing 3,040 textual citations into 95 codes, the dimensions were regrouped into four final thematic categories: (a) program arrival, (b) intervention experience, (c) lessons from the experience, and (d) suggestions for the future.

This reorganization process enabled the articulation of findings based on their cross-cutting and global relevance, reflecting the contextual adaptations of the evaluated program (Calvo et al., 2021; Sierras-Davó et al., 2021). To prioritize the most significant themes for public policy feedback, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel. This analysis identified the themes with the

highest information saturation, facilitating the selection of key content. The combination and integration of qualitative and statistical analysis are part of mixed-methods designs (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2020). In this study, this approach optimized the interpretation of findings from a pragmatic and paradigmatic positioning, because the aim was to comprehend a phenomenon qualitatively at a national scale. Finally, the entire author team reviewed the proposed categories and subcategories, debating the alignment of the data, specific objectives, and interpretations. This collaborative process ensured that the categories reflected both subjective meanings and global evaluations of the program, maximizing the utility of the results for public policy. Thus, the analysis was based on all the interviews and focus groups conducted; however, exemplary verbatim quotes were selected for this article, as it would be impossible to include all the quotes supporting the constructed categories.

2.4 Ethical considerations

This project received approval from the Bioethics Committee of the first author's institution (certificate no. BIOEPUCV H-557-2022). All study participants signed informed consent forms that ensured the confidentiality of their information, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. To safeguard the confidentiality of the data and protect participants further, given the sensitivity of the topic of school violence, the following measures were implemented: (a) Data anonymization: All transcripts were anonymized, replacing identifying details such as participant names, school names, and locations with pseudonyms. Any additional information that could indirectly identify participants was omitted during analysis and reporting. (b) Secure data storage: Transcripts and other materials were securely stored on password-protected servers, accessible only to the research team. This ensured compliance with international standards for handling confidential data. (c) Sensitivity and participant support: Moderators facilitating focus groups and interviews were trained to conduct discussions with empathy and respect, ensuring a safe environment for participants to express themselves. In instances where participants experienced discomfort during sessions, they were provided with information about available support services.

3 Results

3.1 First level

The analysis of the three clusters showed 95 codes organized into six dimensions. To determine which information was relevant for qualitative deepening, descriptive analyses of the proportion of dimensions, codes, and citations were conducted. Although no dimension is fully represented in each cluster, meaning none possesses 100% of the dimension's codes, each cluster contains at least 50% of the codes in each analyzed dimension (see Table 4). This indicates that all dimensions are relevant, making it impossible to discard any of them.

Therefore, all dimensions were included in the qualitative results. However, both the volume of data and the nature of qualitative evaluations necessitated selecting the most relevant information to

TABLE 4 Proportion of qualitative dimensions in each cluster.

	Total		Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
General recommendations	27	100	22	81.48	14	51.85	17	62.96
Barriers	20	100	13	65.00	11	55.00	14	70.00
Program achievements	19	100	18	94.74	13	68.42	14	73.68
Initial expectations	13	100	8	61.54	7	53.85	8	61.54
Facilitators	9	100	5	55.56	5	55.56	5	55.56
Specific recommendations	7	100	6	85.71	4	57.14	5	71.43

provide feedback on the policy. Therefore, the results focus on codes with the highest proportion in the dimensions. This was determined using two criteria: (a) the codes had to be present in all three clusters and (b) the sum of the textual citations had to represent at least 10% of the total citations in the dimension. Table 4 summarizes the codes with the highest proportions.

As shown in Table 5, Clusters 1 and 3, which reported the highest and intermediate scores on the quantitative scales of acceptability, feasibility, and appropriability, respectively, showed a higher percentage of positive evaluations of the program, logistics, and spaces; more complaints about the short implementation time; and more recommendations for improving the Ministry of Education's leadership and incorporating educational actors without management positions (e.g., teachers) into the territorial networks. Cluster 3 featured more qualitative evidence of uncertainty and apprehension at the start of the implementation and more reports regarding the need to broaden the view of co-responsibility in the management of school climate. Cluster 2, whose schools scored lower on the quantitative scales, showed differences in the proportion of feedback compared to the other clusters, including fewer citations overall except for those referring to teachers and professionals feeling overwhelmed and recommendations for developing more practical tools for schools.

3.2 Second level

Next, the results of the reflexive thematic analysis are presented. At this level, the codes with the highest proportion in the qualitative analysis of this study are shown (see Table 5). Table 6 shows the reorganization and regrouping of dimensions into thematic categories that guided the presentation of results.

3.2.1 Category 1: Arrival of the program

These initial experiences not only reflect structural and operational tensions but also highlight the emotions and meanings attributed to the program during a time of heightened vulnerability. For school staff members, the program symbolized both the challenges of postpandemic social reconstruction and an opportunity to address deeply felt needs for emotional and collective support.

The beginning of the program was marked by uncertainty regarding the schools' evaluation and mutual distrust among schools, local representatives of the Ministry of Education, and university advisors. In the schools, doubts emerged regarding the novelty of the program, whereas some apprehension occurred at the local level of the Ministry of Education because the program was designed at the

central level and local representatives did not fully understand the proposal. Additionally, a negative perception grew among university advisors about the flexibility of the program's design, leading to difficulties in the internal organization of each university to take ownership of the implementation. This was compounded by the perception of a lack of transparency in the program's development and decision-making.

The program's centralized design, with insufficient integration of local stakeholders, raised questions about power dynamics in which decisions tend to be imposed from the top down. From a multilevel perspective, this underscores the importance of intermediate actors serving as bridges between the central level and schools. However, their initial exclusion from the design process left them in a weakened position to lead or mediate during implementation. The concerns expressed by representatives at this level highlight a limitation in their ability to feel empowered and reveal the risk of perpetuating hierarchical relationships that may hinder local ownership and engagement.

This is due to the programs we have received from various institutions. One is left with the view of what has happened before. So, one thinks, "This is more of the same." (High School Principal, Focused School, Cluster 1)

On the other hand, there was uncertainty. While there were theoretical foundations, guidelines, and approaches, there were few directions on how to conduct the sessions. Additionally, there were problems with working conditions. Perhaps we experienced some dissatisfaction with certain aspects when going to implement. (University Advisor Psychologist, Cluster 1)

What [the ministry] specifically planned with the university at the end of the year, the truth is, I do not have that information. So, we would need to look at that precisely in this accompaniment, in this beginning, to give a global perspective. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 2)

There was, however, a clear recognition of a critical need, and the creation of this program was seen as a necessary and timely response to address the challenges educational communities faced after 2 years of lockdown. Consequently, there was an expectation that the program would serve as a national support strategy during a significant crisis, characterized by isolation, emotional exhaustion, and the deterioration of school coexistence caused by the aftermath of the lockdown and the

TABLE 5 Codes with the highest proportion in each dimension.

Dimension	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Total
	%	%	%	%
General recommendations				
Limited implementation time	8.18	3.24	4.51	15.94
Need for practical tools for schools	1.41	6.35	3.67	11.42
Need for ministry leadership	7.05	3.81	6.06	16.93
Barriers				
Teacher and professional overload	5.22	8.09	3.24	16.55
Weak management and school structure	4.50	3.96	6.65	15.11
Low feasibility for covering all activities	5.04	2.34	2.70	10.07
Untimely intervention	8.63	7.55	10.07	26.26
Program achievements				
Opportunities to establish learning communities	7.19	5.20	7.51	19.9
Relevance and thematic appreciation of the program	6.47	3.44	5.04	14.95
Recognition of diagnosis and contextualization as necessary for intervention success	4.64	3.84	3.36	11.83
Appreciation and need for coordination with local management for program success	7.27	2.32	1.68	11.27
Initial expectations				
Initial apprehension: "More of the same and an imposition"	7.17	2.79	13.55	23.51
Weaknesses in induction and socialization	12.35	2.39	2.79	17.53
Difficulties with designs and internal organization of each university	4.78	1.59	5.58	11.95
Uncertainties and perception of lack of transparency in program development and decisions	5.18	2.39	13.55	21.12
Facilitators				
Provision of financial and infrastructure resources for program improvement	8.33	7.41	6.48	22.22
Appreciation of logistics and spaces	12.96	2.78	10.19	25.93
Specific recommendations				
Should focus on care for teams	1.82	7.88	3.03	12.73
Should incorporate educational actors without management positions	14.55	14.55	9.09	38.18
University should develop more continuous training	1.21	5.45	7.27	13.94
Should incorporate more actors and a view of school climate in co-responsibility for management in schools	2.42	8.48	12.73	23.64

TABLE 6 Reorganization of qualitative dimensions in thematic categories.

Category	New thematic category	Dimension
1	Arrival of the program	Initial expectations
2	Intervention experience	Facilitators, barriers
3	Learnings from the experience	Program achievements
4	Suggestions for the future	General recommendations, specific recommendations

pandemic at large. In this context, a bleak scenario emerged with the return to in-person activities after COVID-19, marked by disorientation and a sense of ongoing crisis. This affected both the initial expectations of participants and the ability of communities to engage with the program fully from the outset.

These narratives reveal that the postpandemic context amplified preexisting structural tensions in the Chilean educational system, such as emotional exhaustion and collective disorientation. This bleak scenario reflects not only an objective need (e.g., deterioration of school climate and social isolation) but also a deeply felt subjective

need among school communities to rebuild the social fabric. From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), the program responded to a crisis situated across multiple levels—individual, school, and community.

When it comes to initial expectations, you cannot help but commend the ministry's initiative and the team of academics who are coordinating the program nationwide. It's a strategy to support educational communities after two years of the pandemic. I think it's important not to overlook or ignore the historical context in which this was designed and implemented. This is not just about any kind of conflict—it's specifically about what came out of the confinement. I think that always needs to be emphasized as a key factor. (Educational Psychologist, University Advisor, Cluster 3)

When this program arrived last year, it was kind of a postpandemic period. There were a lot of kids dealing with psychological problems, which obviously had an impact on school climate. (Primary School Teacher, Cluster 1)

3.2.2 Category 2: Intervention experience

As the program progressed in its implementation, closer ties formed between university advisors and schools, alongside better coordination with local ministry representatives. In this regard, participants reported a high appreciation for the provision of financial and infrastructure resources for the proper execution of the program, the spaces used, and the work carried out.

The university advisors had to develop strategies to build management capacities in schools, despite not always having the necessary competencies themselves. Paradoxically, this often led them to view weaknesses in the management of the focused schools as obstacles rather than objectives to address. Despite this, the program achieved high adherence and commitment from the schools, even though it required extraordinary work. In this sense, the program has been described as an ambitious experience that aimed to achieve significant transformations in a short period. This situation intensified the work of the university advisory teams and increased the burden on teachers and support staff members, who are already overloaded with bureaucratic work and accountability. For example, in focused schools, the same team that met biweekly or weekly with the university advisor also had to attend biweekly network meetings. This particularly affected small and rural schools with limited staffs, although it did not diminish their motivation to attend the scheduled activities.

One concern of the university advisory teams was that this overintensification and teacher burden might lead schools to develop instrumental motivations related to implementation. Local ministry representatives identified that this workload negatively affected the continuity of participants attending network activities.

Additionally, the program began implementation with only a few months remaining in the school year, which was not well received.

We have very little time, especially those of us who work in a rural school and teach from first to sixth [grade] with all the children together. There's one class for six students because we cover six subjects in one class. So, honestly, preparing six guides, six tests, and six lesson plans for one class is arduous; it's heavy. So, it's hard to find the time, but we did make the time, and we did travel from

the other end of the municipality to the center. (Rural School Teacher, School Climate Network Participant, Cluster 1)

In some establishments, due to the overload on management teams, the work is very focused on accountability. "I have to comply with reports." "I have to adjust protocols." "How do I apply them?" So, everything was very much related to strategies for improving protocols, from "the recipe" in school climate. (Teacher, University Advisor, Cluster 2)

Time was a barrier. The period in which it was implemented was super stressful. It was from October to December, and those are the months with the most activities in schools, where there is a lot to do, a lot to manage. Despite the willingness, they were always running around, saying, "I cannot go this time; someone will go in my place." (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 3)

This finding highlights structural tensions and dynamics inherent in the implementation of large-scale educational programs. On one hand, it underscores challenges related to the role of technical assistance, testing the ability of advisors to act as mediators. It challenges them to fulfill their role in facilitating processes of co-creation and local adaptation rather than operating as external agents who foster an asymmetrical relationship. Additionally, the narratives about the intensification of work among teachers and support staff members reveal how additional demands, such as external programs, erode the time available for essential pedagogical tasks and contribute to work-related stress. In this case, the ambitious implementation during a short period exacerbated these tensions, putting the program's sustainability at risk. Finally, these findings highlight the inequities and structural diversity in Chile's educational system, where resources and capacities vary significantly depending on geographic and socioeconomic contexts. The underlying risk evident in these textual accounts is the paradox that a program designed to provide educational support may inadvertently exacerbate existing gaps.

Despite the challenges, the program demonstrated its feasibility, given the WSA consistently resonated with participants as a sense-making asset. From the outset, the conceptual model underlying the program was valued and recognized as meaningful and applicable.

The whole-school approach, as my colleague mentioned, provides strategies that are very practical. When applied to the area of school climate—where we often focus more on problems than on positive actions—it really helps bridge the two. I think it was very effective in that sense because it simplifies things and offers more actionable strategies that are easier to implement. (Primary School Teacher, Cluster 1)

As my colleague mentioned, we were not initially included, but we had already shown some initial interest. As we started working together with the network, my interest grew because they were talking about the whole-school approach, which is a way of working that I've been trying to implement in the school for a few years now. So, of course, my initial interest was to deepen my understanding and figure out how I could improve that work.

Naturally, I was very interested. (Elementary school principal, Cluster 1)

The whole-school approach seemed like an excellent idea to me—it was really good. So good, in fact, that some of its objectives felt a bit hard to achieve, or rather, they seemed more like long-term goals, maybe two or three years down the line, which are definitely attainable. Overall, I was very satisfied with that idea. (School Teacher, School Climate Network Participant, Cluster 3)

The whole-school approach does seem useful to me. For example, the surveys that were conducted revealed that a significant portion of the interventions—or much of the time spent by the teams—is focused on what you could call the tip of the triangle. That is, tertiary interventions aimed at repairing issues rather than building. There's comparatively less time dedicated to establishing solid foundations. (Educational Psychologist, University Advisor, Cluster 3)

These experiences shed light on the perception and practical implications of the WSA in the program's context, viewed through three key perspectives: its transformative potential, the challenges perceived in its implementation, and the balance between reactive and preventive strategies. The WSA was perceived as a practical and accessible approach that simplifies the management of school climate. The notion of a bridge between problems and positive actions suggests that this approach shifts the usual narrative in schools—from a focus on negatives, such as conflict or violence, to a more proactive and constructive model. This implies that the WSA has the potential to redefine school climate dynamics, not merely as a reactive process but also as an opportunity to foster socioemotional skills and community cohesion. Although participants viewed the WSA as excellent, its objectives were considered challenging to achieve in the short term, with goals projected over the medium to long term (2 to 3 years). This highlights a tension between the program's immediate expectations and the reality of systemic transformations in schools. It underscores the need to align the program's expectations with the time and resources available to schools, reflecting a challenge of temporal feasibility. Educators need to perceive tangible progress to sustain their commitment to more ambitious long-term objectives.

Finally, these findings emphasize a shared need between schools and the ACSA program to build strong preventive foundations, demonstrating the value of the multitiered intervention pyramid model. Prioritizing universal and preventive levels is crucial to ensuring the sustainability of change. This point reflects the importance of participation and appropriability of the WSA by educational communities.

On a subjective level, the intervention experience evoked a mix of pride, challenge, and empowerment among participants as they navigated the complexities of the postpandemic Chilean school context. For many, the extraordinary effort required was not merely additional work but also an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to their educational communities, particularly in rural schools and those with limited resources. Emotionally, the WSA was perceived as a transformative framework that enabled progress in reimagining school coexistence, shifting the focus from problems to positive, collective actions. However, the tension between the program's potential and structural limitations left

participants with mixed feelings: genuine motivation to achieve meaningful goals, coupled with frustration about the constraints of time and resources. These experiences reveal that the meanings attributed to the intervention extend beyond its technical objectives, reflecting a deep yearning for social and personal reconstruction in an educational system profoundly affected by the pandemic.

3.2.3 Category 3: Learnings from the experience

Among the most relevant aspects of the implementation of the program as a learning experience for the schools was the belief that decisions should be based on evidence. This is reflected in the recognition and appreciation of the initial diagnosis and contextualization for the success of the intervention. Additionally, participants indicated a high appreciation for the relevance and focus of the program among schools, universities, and the ministry. As a result, positive awareness of the WSA for school climate and mental health has been established.

These findings demonstrate that the emphasis on evidence and the initial diagnostic process as a foundation for action aligns with implementation theories that highlight the importance of understanding initial conditions to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of interventions. In this case, the initial diagnosis not only provided a snapshot of the state of the school climate but also strengthened stakeholders' confidence by showing that their realities were being considered. The focus on evidence-based decision-making reflects a shift toward a more reflective and less improvised—and therefore, more professionally oriented—practice in managing school climate. This approach enabled school communities, affected by the lockdown and its aftermath, to regain a sense of agency and purpose in their actions.

Regarding the subjective and emotional meanings of the experience, the lessons learned not only reinforced the importance of evidence-based decision making but also highlighted a shift in the collective perception of the transformative potential of networked work and interinstitutional collaboration. For many participants, this process symbolized a step toward a more reflective and less improvised practice, in which data not only guided decisions but also provided a renewed sense of control and purpose in a postpandemic context of disorientation.

On the other hand, I believe that the whole-school approach was highly relevant—very concrete and practical. My expectation was that it could highlight the fact that, in general, the culture in our country tends to be more reactive, constantly responding to emergencies on an individual basis. It's essential to allocate time to more planned practices, to think and design policies based on more concrete evidence—whether at the level of internal school policies or, in this case, communal policies on school coexistence. (Educational Psychologist, University Advisor, Cluster 1)

I share my colleague's perspective because we started working together. Previously, we were a very small climate team, and we realized how important data is. Before, we worked mostly based on immediate issues, what was happening at the school, and what we observed. Working with data provided by students, parents, and teachers helped focus our efforts. It allowed us to concentrate on the actual problems. So, I completely agree with

what she mentioned. (Social Worker, High School, Participant in School Climate Network, Cluster 3)

Well, I joined the work that was already underway, and honestly, being able to work with data ... it shows us where we need to focus. It's always helpful. Data is a great tool to reorient, correct, or continue doing what is already working well, right? So, it's always necessary. In my case, I joined the ongoing work, and it's been fantastic. (History teacher, High School, Participant in School Climate Network, Cluster 3)

I feel really satisfied with what we managed to do because, honestly, we did not have much data to use for planning before, and now we actually have something to work with. I paid close attention to the presentation, and the data they shared was super helpful for coming up with actions—not just for the program, but also for the regular work we do. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 2)

This experience highlighted the need for proper coordination with local management for the success of such interventions, whether with educational administrators or intermediate levels of the Ministry of Education. Nonetheless, the most highly valued experience of coordination as a collective learning involved the strategy of the municipal school climate networks. This work can be interpreted as an opportunity to develop interschool strategies with a collective and local perspective.

Interesting, I would say, because we had high expectations of what could happen with the program. The school functions alone here. The municipal network does not work much. This was the first instance where we considered that we would be able to understand the reality of school climate in other schools. One does a comparative exercise, gets ideas from there, from that work. (Primary School Psychologist, Focused School, Cluster 3)

They experienced it as a moment to share experiences, which meant building common concepts, like a community, following the whole-school approach. So, I think that was very satisfying for me to witness. Seeing how these conversations developed where we could share experiences, what is known as “learning communities.” (Educational Psychologist, University Advisor, Cluster 1)

I think it's very positive to work in a network. Returning to the component, what I have worked on in the network allows for feedback, sharing, empathizing, building new tools, sharing work strategies, seeing other work methodologies, and also reflecting and analyzing what I am doing, which is also positive. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 3)

In this context, networks and shared learning were more than only operational tools; they represented a paradigm shift toward a collaborative approach. The experiences shared in the interviews demonstrate that in times of crisis such as the pandemic and postpandemic period, these dynamics not only enable more effective responses to challenges but also foster transformative

learning. This, in turn, strengthens the educational system as a whole by enhancing the sense of cohesion and social support.

It was reassuring to know that it wasn't just us. At first, we were worried when we saw it was happening everywhere. But then, with the reassurance that we were not doing things wrong and that it was a postpandemic or postconfinement consequence, we focused on addressing it. (Physical Education Teacher, Cluster 3)

The pandemic disrupted us, but by then, work on building networks was already underway, including provincial-level meetings on school coexistence. These efforts were primarily focused on how to mobilize the responsible individuals to gradually begin implementing the national coexistence policy. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 1)

These experiences illustrate how school networks acted as environments for collective professional development, in which participants transitioned from peripheral roles to more central positions in the construction of solutions. In the framework of the WSA, these networks consolidated a systemic and interdependent perspective on school coexistence. As a result, these dynamics not only strengthened the individual and group capacities of schools but also contributed to rebuilding the social fabric disrupted by the pandemic. The opportunity to share experiences among schools helped reduce the sense of isolation, fostering cohesion and mutual support in a context marked by disconnection. This reflects the program's emotional and social impact. In a period characterized by isolation, insecurity, and emotional exhaustion, these networks provided a space to validate experiences, build trust, and reinforce a sense of community in the postpandemic context.

The lessons learned from the ACSA experience highlight a sense of strengthened connections among the various systems influencing student development (schools, communities, and local educational systems). This is a critical task in postpandemic recovery, enabling educational stakeholders not only to address immediate challenges but also to imagine and construct new possibilities for school coexistence. This may represent an example of transformative learning, whereby the challenges of the crisis act as catalysts for innovation and systemic change.

Beyond their operational value, school networks became a symbol of hope and reconstruction for participants, providing a space where they could share not only strategies but also emotions and lived experiences during a period of isolation and disconnection. For many, these interactions offered emotional relief by confirming they were not facing challenges alone and reinforced a sense of belonging and collective purpose. In a context marked by postpandemic insecurity and exhaustion, these networks were seen as a bridge toward rebuilding human and professional relationships, transforming the crisis into an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion.

3.2.4 Category 4: suggestions for the future

First, participants suggested that the program have a longer implementation period, ensure continuity from one year to the next, and start at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, they recommended incorporating actions aimed at caring for school teams to promote mental health among teachers and support staff members. In this regard, several suggestions reflected interest in enabling the

program to operate at different levels in schools. Although the program is described as an intervention program for managing coexistence, this study highlights the need to include educational actors who do not hold management positions in the school to promote a systemic and complex approach to school climate. This could increase the number of people responsible for coexistence and partly relieve the burden on educational leaders.

Moreover, respondents proposed that future versions of the program offer practical strategies and tools for schools. School representatives also expected universities to develop more courses and training, requiring a stronger connection and relationship. Also, local Ministry of Education representatives suggested they direct the universities in future versions of the program. University advisors also shared this recommendation.

That when I leave the meeting, I have a strategy that I can sit down with once I arrive at the school and say, “OK, this is what worked for me, this is what I have here at the high school, I’m going to adapt it and implement it.” (Head of Pedagogical Technical Unit, High School, Participant in School Climate Network, Cluster 1)

Work more with other community actors, so the program has more reach and impact. And this is very much in line with the program’s approach, the collective construction or collective management of school climate. (Psychologist, University Advisor, Cluster 1)

I would like to, and I reiterate, have the possibility to actively participate in the process in general, from start to finish. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 2)

Maybe feel more ownership of the program or feel more knowledgeable—I do not know, trained in the model to provide the required support. (Local Ministry of Education Representative, Cluster 3)

Finally, a key recommendation for this program was to strengthen the clarity and definition of its objectives from the outset, ensuring that educational communities understand what the program aims to achieve and how those goals will be reached. Furthermore, in a postpandemic context, it seems essential to incorporate a focus on emotional support and rebuilding relationships to address communication issues, emotional exhaustion, and tensions identified during the pandemic, before moving on to more advanced strategies.

The program became a bit clearer toward the end, more so than at the beginning. I mean, the outcome, in the end, was seeing communities that managed to have conversations around a text as part of a crisis intervention. But honestly, I’m not sure if the result of those discussions fully matched what the program was aiming for. It’s important to point out that we were dealing with what I’d call the full darkness of the postpandemic period—hurt communities, mistreated, strained in their relationships with the school administrators, facing serious communication issues, emotional exhaustion, tensions, violence, and mistreatment. (Teacher, University Advisor, Cluster 2)

These recommendations should be interpreted as strategies to rebuild the social fabric and strengthen the educational system in response to the lasting impacts of the pandemic. In an educational system strained by emotional exhaustion and social disconnection, a long-term program should ensure that schools have the time needed to rebuild relationships and establish a solid foundation for school coexistence. The ACSA program addresses this by proposing a phased strategy. Furthermore, the recommendation to incorporate actions targeting the mental health of teachers and support staff members directly addresses one of the most significant postpandemic challenges: emotional exhaustion and work-related stress. The well-being of adults in the school environment has a direct impact on the development and well-being of students. Emotionally healthy teachers are better equipped to establish positive relationships and effectively manage conflicts. This recommendation is crucial to mitigating the ripple effect of the pandemic, in which accumulated tensions can prolong negative effects on school climate and the quality of educational interactions.

The suggestion to include educational stakeholders beyond school leaders reflects the need for a more inclusive and systemic approach. This would foster equitable distribution of responsibilities and promote collective empowerment, reducing the excessive burden on school leaders. This finding aligns closely with the WSA, which emphasizes that effective interventions must involve the entire educational community. This includes not only teachers and administrators but also students, families, and community members, creating a stable network of support. In a postpandemic context, in which school and community relationships have been fragmented, broad participation can act as a driver of social cohesion and resilience. From a multilevel perspective, empowering local leadership strengthens program ownership and enhances coordination across levels of the educational system. In Chile, given its significant territorial and structural diversity, reinforcing local leadership and coordination capacities is essential to overcoming inequalities and ensuring a more equitable and effective implementation.

4 Discussion

This study involved a qualitative evaluation of the Learning to Live Together Program (ACSA) of the Chilean Ministry of Education during its initial implementation phase. This program was designed with a WSA aimed at developing competencies and skills for managing school climate. The purpose of the study was to provide scientific evidence for informed decision-making about the feasibility of implementing the program and its possibility of scalability. Based on a mixed-methods design, the results show a positive evaluation of the feasibility of program, which generally received high adherence and commitment from schools. These findings are coherent with [Rojas-Andrade et al.’s \(2024\)](#) quantitative evaluation of the feasibility of the program, which showed the program to be feasible, acceptable, and highly possible to be appropriated by schools. Our qualitative findings add positive collective cognitive and emotional resonance with the program. Particularly salient was the conceptual acceptance of the WSA as the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the program. The qualitative results from this feasibility evaluation show that the program is indeed perceived as acceptable and understood as feasible to implement because (a) the program’s conceptual model, based on a

WSA perspective, makes sense; (b) working with universities that are connected to the territories of the schools matters and is valued as positive; and (c) forming professional communities of learning is perceived as highly important. There are numerous quotes to support this sense-making of the feasibility of the program in how it was presented through its various components.

Also of note is the positive evaluation of the feasibility of forming and sustaining the territorial networks of schools. These school networks were theoretically conceptualized and designed as professional learning communities (Louis and Leithwood, 2021) in the program. The findings of this study show that all types of participants interviewed—school staff members, university teams, and regional-level Ministry of Education personnel—perceived that this implementation strategy offers opportunities and conditions for collective reflexive processes and that the program can accomplish its ToC, particularly its objective of “improving skills and competencies for managing school climate through WSA” by sharing diagnoses, strategies, and intervention designs related to school violence and climate. Participants described these networks as an opportunity to develop learning communities that enable collective and local strategy formulation. Hence, the sense-making largely present in the findings may be interpreted as initial signs of collective movements from peripheral to more central discourse communities (Lave and Wenger, 2001). This responds to the need to rebuild the social fabric fractured during the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that the desire to recover collective educational spaces is not exclusive to children, adolescents, and their families (Fervers et al., 2023; Gardiner-Smith and Jackson, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic left a profound mark on school climate. It intensified disorientation and emotional exhaustion, creating tensions that initially hindered participants’ ability to engage fully with the program. However, school climate networks and shared learning dynamics emerged as key tools—not only to tackle immediate challenges but also to foster a paradigm shift toward more collaborative and sustainable approaches. For many participants, the implementation of the ACSA program represented a process of emotional and social reconstruction following the devastating impact of the pandemic. School networks, initially conceived as operational tools, evolved into spaces for emotional validation and collective support. Knowing that others were facing similar challenges offered comfort and helped dispel feelings of isolation and insecurity. In this context, participants not only highlighted the program’s practical utility but also its ability to restore confidence in their capabilities and reinforce a sense of shared belonging and purpose. This emotional aspect proved crucial in addressing the crisis and laid the foundation for a deeper commitment to collaborative work.

The emphasis on the collective as a school value was present in Chile during the pandemic period (López et al., 2022). However, this study shows that besides strengthening community decision-making spaces in schools, the geographical and symbolic spaces with which schools interact are crucial. In this sense, these findings confirm the relevance of promoting actions from a WSA (Nyoni et al., 2023) with a territorial focus, restoring the school’s societal interactions with its environment (Weare and Nind, 2011).

The beginning of the program was marked by uncertainty and mutual distrust, particularly among schools with an intermediate level of acceptability (Cluster 3). These issues were resolved as the

implementation progressed. During the process, critical moments related to the workload of teachers and support staff members, who struggled to meet the program’s demands and activities. This was mainly observed in schools with the lowest initial adherence (Cluster 2). Despite these challenges, the program achieved high adherence and commitment, largely due to the appreciation of evidence-based decision-making and contextualization as key factors for success. The emphasis on evidence-based decision-making was perceived not only as a technical tool but also as an opportunity to regain control and agency in a context of uncertainty. Participants expressed that working with data not only allowed them to address specific problems but also facilitated reflection and strategic planning, fostering a renewed sense of collective empowerment. This experience marked a shift toward more thoughtful and less improvised practices, paving the way for the professionalization of school practices and consolidating a shared sense of purpose among the various stakeholders involved.

Hence, the results of this study suggest that ensuring the success of a program of this nature requires a longer implementation period and a schedule that aligns with school timelines. Participants in the group of schools with the highest initial adherence to the program (Cluster 1) emphasized this need. Additionally, interviewees recommend incorporating actions to care for educational teams, promote mental health, and expand participation in the management of school climate. These recommendations highlight the need to continue addressing the mental health effects of the pandemic (Cañón Buitrago et al., 2021; Lizana and Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Cortés-Álvarez et al., 2023) and recognize that these strategies should emphasize the entire educational community, beyond the actions of school leaders (Weare and Nind, 2011). This aspect is central because although the educational policy of the Chilean Ministry of Education has focused on enhancing school staff’s capacities for improving school climate, emerging evidence on the WSA in postpandemic contexts aligns with this study’s conclusion that these strategies would be more effective if the entire school community participated (Müller et al., 2022; Rahm et al., 2024). In this regard, a limitation of this study was not incorporating the voices of family and community members, whose participation has shown to be important in WSA initiatives in other parts of the world (Nyoni et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2024). This was mainly due to the fact that this qualitative study was framed in a larger mixed-methods evaluation of the feasibility of the program and not (yet) of its impact or effectiveness in terms of reducing school violence and improving school climate. These research questions form part of a mixed-methods impact evaluation of the program, whose data production will take place in 2025. We suggest incorporating families and community members as participants of the qualitative phase of this future study.

Based on this qualitative evaluation of the feasibility of the program in terms of its initial acceptability and appropriability (Rojas-Andrade et al., 2024), future versions of this program should offer practical strategies and tools for schools and universities to develop more courses and training based on a preventive approach (Espelage and Swearer, 2023). This study shows that schools are open to reflecting on the need to focus their efforts on broad actions oriented toward promotion. Simply put, incorporating external professionals who work with schools—in this case, universities—successfully builds capacity

in schools without creating dependencies for change, if done from a WSA.

Finally, participants in this study suggested that in future implementations, program leadership should be in the hands of local Ministry of Education representatives, who should be responsible for the implementation carried out by the universities through effective leadership, firm and clear policies, and organizational structures that allow for continuity and support of these interventions over time (Nyoni et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2024). These aspects were particularly highlighted by schools with higher and intermediate initial acceptability of the program (Clusters 1 and 3).

In summary, regarding the main barriers and facilitators of the program, key obstacles include a lack of time, workload demands, and initial lack of clarity, whereas sense-making of the WSA, school networks as professional learning communities, working with universities in their territories, and the emphasis on data-driven decision-making stand out as key facilitators.

The limitations of this study relate to difficulty evaluating impacts on changes in beliefs or behaviors from such interventions, given the focus on user evaluations. The short implementation timeline and the reliance on user-based meanings rather than direct behavioral or systemic outcomes are additional limitations. Therefore, future studies should employ qualitative evaluation methodologies that monitor the transfer of learnings developed in programs with a WSA to everyday practice and quantitative and qualitative indicators of change over time on behaviors, attitudes, and belief systems.

Through a university–Ministry of Education partnership and a technical evaluation committee of the ACSA program, the results of this large-scale qualitative evaluation strengthen the program's ToC (Figure 2) and identify indicators that allow for measuring of intervention outcomes in a future outcome and impact evaluation of the program (Ministry of Education, 2024b; see Table 7).

TABLE 7 Recommendations of indicators for outcome and impact evaluation of the ACSA program, based on the program's theory of change.

<p>We recommend the ACSA program's ToC guide the theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions regarding the evaluation of outcomes and impact of the program, in three differentiated levels: evaluation of products, evaluation of outcomes, evaluation of impact.</p> <p>Level: product evaluation</p> <p><i>Actions carried out during territorial network and support sessions and their achievements.</i></p> <p>In line with the developed ToC, it is recommended to incorporate descriptions and achievement indicators of the actions implemented during the strategies of (a) territorial networks and (b) support. These strategies are known to influence the development of the skills and competencies the ACSA program aims to foster.</p> <p>Level: outcome evaluation</p> <p><i>Characterization of school climate management skills.</i> According to the ToC, the following indicators should be considered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for organizational diagnosis and development. • Skills to put into practice distributed leadership and inter-professional coordination. • Skills to plan, implement, and evaluate a school Climate improvement plan that incorporates actions based on the WSA. • Knowledge of theories, strategies, and actions to reduce school violence and improve school climate, aligned with the WSA. <p>We recommend using López et al.'s (2021a) questionnaire for this purpose.</p> <p>Level: impact evaluation</p> <p><i>Characterization of schools and their students.</i> It is recommended to include the following school-level indicators: socioeconomic level, macrozone, region, commune, administrative dependency, enrolment, school complexity (e.g., only primary; primary and secondary), academic performance, and families' educational expectations. This information is available in the administrative databases of the Ministry of Education.</p> <p><i>Characterization of school climate teams.</i> It is recommended to collect the following indicators to characterize school climate teams in educational establishments, considering at least these variables:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Profession b) Employment conditions: contract type, work hours c) Staffing: number of members in the school climate team (SCT) relative to the school's enrollment d) Years of experience: in the school system, in the establishment, and working on school climate in the establishment e) Previous training in school climate (course, diploma, master's degree) <p>This information is not fully available in the administrative databases of the Ministry of Education. It is recommended to use questions from the study conducted by the Center for Research on Inclusive Education for UNICEF and the Ministry of Education.</p> <p><i>Impact variables.</i> It is recommended to use the following indicators to evaluate the program's impact:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Quality of school climate, from the students' perception, operationalized as reports of good treatment among students and between students and teachers b) Reports of school violence, operationalized as: (a) Reports of physical, verbal, and social exclusion victimization and reports of discrimination based on characteristics and conditions. This information is available in the databases of the Agency for Quality. It is recommended to use data disaggregated by actor rather than the weighted multi-actor index. (b) Registries of parents' complaints of school violence (<i>maltrato escolar</i>) in the Superintendency of Education. <p><i>Moderating and mediating variables.</i> When using structural equation models or similar approaches, it is recommended to include the following databases as moderating or mediating variables:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Student attendance b) Attendance and burnout of teachers and education assistants, measured through medical leave data c) Academic performance and educational expectations of students, measured through questions available in the databases of the Agency for Quality
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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

This study was approved by bioethical certificate no. BIOEUCV-H-557-2022 from the Bioethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. The study was conducted in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

VL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CC-A: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PJ: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft. JT-V: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft. MR: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. JA: Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. AF: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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