Caring leadership practices in Chilean educational communities: Perceptions of school principals and teachers

Andrea Carrasco [iD] and
Claudio Montoya [iD]

Abstract
Caring leadership has emerged as an approach that can help strengthen school leadership practices to promote the cognitive and social-emotional development of the school community. Therefore, our goal is to study the differences between how school principals perceive their practices to promote the development of a school culture of care and teachers' perceptions of those same practices. For this purpose, the Caring School Leadership Questionnaire (CSLQ) by author Van Der Vyver (2014), was translated and validated statistically and subsequently applied to 332 school principals and 333 teachers in the Metropolitan Region of Chile. The results of the questionnaire reveal different perceptions among the two types of actors, varying across each dimension. Most differences are seen around the practices related to psychological well-being, with fewer noticeable differences in relation to practices associated with the workplace.

Keywords
Leadership, caring, teachers, school principals

The topic of care has gained relevance in recent years thanks to a number of phenomena, including the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic 4 years ago, changes in technology, immigration, and others. All of these circumstances have impacted the educational context and forced schools to transform their routines and practices. Schools have been under pressure to change not only the way they teach but also their fundamental administrative practices. In such a context, school leaders have become more essential than ever before (Lucena et al., 2021).

In this sense, promoting a culture of care in educational communities is a topic that has become increasingly relevant in recent years, as care is an essential part of the school context. Research has

Corresponding author:
Andrea Carrasco Sáez, Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, University of Chile, Santiago, Chile.
Email: ancarrasco@uchile.cl

highlighted the need for schools to explicitly develop strategies for creating an institutional culture of care (Cleovoulou et al., 2022; Nganga et al., 2019). This aspect has been taken into account in educational policies, as it allows for an analysis of the organizational and cultural conditions to generate a better teaching-learning process (Murphy and Louis, 2018). Furthermore, it fosters attitudes, practices, and relationships that promote the well-being of all members of educational communities (Ryu et al., 2020). The well-being of teachers is enhanced when the school leadership team creates a positive atmosphere in the school, for example, by prioritizing well-being policies and promoting healthy relationships between students and staff (Taylor et al., 2024). In fact, international programs indicate that well-being policies are one of the most effective mechanisms for improving student performance outcomes (Balica, 2021).

The Chilean context has not been exempt from this situation, with the Ministry of Education recently publishing a School Coexistence Policy 2024–2030, aimed at improving peaceful coexistence in educational communities from a care ethics dimension of collective care (Ministerio de Educación, 2024). Fundamentally, the goal is for individuals within school communities to promote respect and the construction of the common good. The principle of collective care is defined as "the participation of all individuals within the educational community in the continuous transformation of their ways of coexisting to safeguard respect and the common good." It should be noted that both individual and collective actions affect the mental health and overall well-being of each member of the community. This principle branches out into other values such as trust, shared responsibility, and collaboration (Ministerio de Educación, 2024: 19).

Implementing a school coexistence plan based on the principles of collective care in educational institutions requires school leadership teams capable of developing and guiding care practices in school communities. This is because leadership is understood as a relevant and determining factor for student learning, improving the learning process, teacher professional development, conflict resolution within school communities, and opportunities to learn and improve educational practices that yield positive learning outcomes (Bolívar, 2019; Bolívar et al., 2022; Leithwood, 2009). Therefore, what educational leaders do or do not do to promote communities of care is important when projecting how to move towards better teacher well-being, student learning, and the common good in school environments.

The care shown towards teachers by leaders serves as a model for the way teachers care for students, highlighting the interplay between practices that benefit both groups (Wall, 2020). Teachers who are valued, empowered, and engaged perform better in the classroom (Kaynak, 2020).

In this context, it is important to inquire into the practices applied by school principals to promote a culture of care, particularly with their teachers. Thus, this study asks the question: What are the differences between how school principals perceive their own practices to promote the development of a school culture of care and teachers' perceptions of those same practices? To this end, we have applied an international questionnaire previously validated in Chile, the *Caring School Leadership Questionnaire* (CSLQ) by Van der Vyver et al. (2014), which allows us to collect the perceptions of school principals and teachers on caring leadership practices in schools located in the Metropolitan Area of Santiago, Chile's capital, where nearly half of the country's population resides.

Theoretical framework

Within the framework of this study, caring leadership is understood as the leadership approach that emphasizes building caring relations within the educational community. This leadership involves both emotional support for teachers and the development of the school community, promoting a

safe and collaborative organizational environment. Through empathy, equality, and attention to individual and collective needs, educational leaders foster the well-being of all members of the community, which then has a positive impact on student learning and social cohesion (Noddings, 2002a; Ryu et al., 2020; Smylie et al., 2016, 2020).

One key aspect of caring leadership is *disposition*, understood as the active willingness to apply caring practices as a basic component to support effective caring leadership.

Finally, this type of leadership requires a clear alignment between the perceptions of leaders and those of the school community members regarding well-being, work environment, and management. Effective *caring leadership* is capable of bridging existing gaps, ensuring that the perceptions regarding care and support are shared and reflected in the experiences of all those involved (Noddings, 2002a; Smylie et al., 2016).

Caring leadership

Care is understood as a relational dynamic in which the caregiver provides, and the person cared for receives and is open to care. Care is a reflexive phenomenon where the care that people receive becomes a model for how to care for others and themselves (Noddings, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Moreover, care is a value of democracy and must be understood from a pluralist perspective. It is not a mere feeling or disposition, nor is it a series of actions, but rather a complex set of practices (Tronto, 2018). Therefore,

> how I treat you may bring out the best or worst in you. How you behave may provide a model for me to grow and become better than I am. Whether I can become and remain a caring person—one who enters regularly into caring relations—depends in large part on how you respond to me. (Noddings, 2002a: 43)

For this reason, education consists of not only preparing students for life and citizenship from an economic perspective but also preparing them for a life of care: forming a family, raising children, relating to others, appreciating beauty, valuing our environment, living an ethical life, among others (Noddings, 2002b).

Care is not solely based on the feeling between people but also seeks practice and action from an educational perspective. Therefore, a school's first obligation is care, and this must be latent in its structure, in its relationships, and in its curriculum (Noddings, 2002a).

In this sense, if care is a primary obligation of schools, it also becomes part of the student culture, and its practices may be interpersonal (individual) and institutional. In contrast to interpersonal care, institutional care often focuses on the common good of the organization (Walls, 2021). Educational organizations must create a culture of care that emphasizes both student learning and care through coherent standards or expectations (Ryu et al., 2020), and the role of educational leaders is vital to achieving a culture of care.

However, from a school leadership and management perspective, care manifests as different practices and approaches that contribute to the well-being of the educational community (Kennedy and Walls, 2022). Therefore, it is important to strengthen caring leadership practices in schools in order to promote the cognitive and social-emotional development of the educational community, particularly of the students (Louis and Murphy, 2019).

Caring leadership is defined as the "central quality of academic and social support" (Louis et al., 2016: 2) and goes beyond the relationship between teachers and students to also promote a better education and transformation of the teaching process, through leadership practices that are

developed in a broader scope of action, such as care practices for the school community as a whole (Smylie et al., 2016).

Caring leadership is expected to generate an organizational culture that surpasses individual motivations and enables the construction of a culture of care and organizational practices that allow the members of a school to feel like it is a safe place where students learn and perform well (Ryu et al., 2020).

Caring leadership and management for the workplace

A leader's role is crucial to the development of a culture of care, and they must act with both empathy and a real understanding of the needs of the people within the organization to ensure that they feel valued and supported (Smit, 2018). Leading from care plays a key part in the goals of educational institutions since it "can aim to promote certain experiential benefits: social, psychological, and emotional benefits that accrue by being in caring relationships and feeling cared for. Caring itself can be educative" (Smylie et al., 2016: 7).

On the other hand, it is necessary for leaders to improve school management through open communication and horizontal dialogue between leaders, teachers, students, parents, and guardians, in order to create an atmosphere of mutual support and understanding, promote empathy and understanding, and create more inclusive, caring environments that are sensitive to the different needs of the school community (Carrasco and Barraza, 2020; Carrasco and Palma, 2024; Carrasco, 2024). Caring management must try to empower teams through inclusive decision-making, promoting a shared commitment to the institution's collective values and goals. They need to move beyond viewing caring management as limited to the teacher-student relationship and take steps towards creating a culture of care as an integral part of the school community (Ryu et al., 2020). There is a clear need to incorporate these care qualities into institutional documents and ensure their adoption. This can help develop the capacity for care by creating supportive organizational conditions and fostering contexts for caregiving beyond the school (Smylie et al., 2016).

Caring leadership and management manifest through different practices and approaches that contribute to the well-being of the educational community. Initially, by creating a space that is conducive to care, allocating resources, and promoting professional knowledge, school principals can lay the foundations for building stronger communities that feel safer for their members (Barcelona et al., 2022).

In this sense, creating a safe, equitable, and well-maintained workplace that facilitates the optimal conditions for teachers' professional and personal development is fundamental in a culture of care and is what leadership should strive to promote. Thus, just as recognizing the importance of salary satisfaction, job security, and workload management is key to improving the well-being of the teaching staff (Taylor et al., 2024), so is the availability of adequate resources, active staff participation, and firm support by the leadership team.

To improve the teaching and learning processes, teachers must be prepared to address students' needs and learning difficulties in the classroom, in order to give those students the care they need (Largo Arenas et al., 2018). This is why it is essential to ensure that they have the resources and external support structures so that their ability to provide such care is not affected (Häggström et al., 2020). Leaders need to guarantee that teaching staff can offer opinions and participate actively in the decision-making processes (Taylor et al., 2024).

Caring leadership for teacher and student well-being

When leaders promote caring leadership practices, they are promoting an organizational culture that involves the school community and sets an example for replicating such practices. For example, the care shown towards teachers by leaders serves as a model for the way teachers care for students, highlighting the interplay between practices that benefit both groups (Wall, 2020).

In this sense, there is increasing evidence to show that factors related to the teaching staff are what most affect learning in schools. When teachers feel valued, respected, empowered, and involved in the decision-making processes, they are more likely to feel a greater sense of well-being (Kaynak, 2020). It should be noted that teacher well-being can lead to greater job satisfaction, more motivation, and better performance in the classroom, and this will undoubtedly have a significant impact on their students' well-being and academic success (Kaynak, 2020; Taylor et al., 2024). For example, an environment that prioritizes caring for teachers can significantly reduce behavioral issues, which improves both the school atmosphere and academic performance (Gallagher et al., 2019). Teachers experience greater job satisfaction and a sense of personal accomplishment when they integrate care as an essential part of their pedagogical practice (Gkonou and Miller, 2017) and this, in turn, strengthens their ability to manage complex learning environments, such as classrooms with anxious students, where emotional well-being is fundamental to improving academic performance.

Just like the physical, organizational, and social aspects of the workplace are important to employee well-being, research also shows that when teachers have a positive perception of the school where they work, they suffer less from burnout, establish stronger ties between the school and families, and present lower rates of voluntary resignation (Taylor et al., 2024). For this reason, the ability of school leaders to create an environment of emotional support and mutual respect, promoting recognition and empathy within the educational community, and particularly among its teachers, is a key factor when defining caring leadership practices. This is because the emotion of care is one reason many teachers decide to go into teaching, and when that aspect is recognized, it can generate satisfaction, a feeling of accomplishment, and greater teacher agency (Gkonou and Miller, 2017; Porter et al., 2022).

According to the OECD (2017), teacher well-being is comprised of variables such as educational achievement, educational expectations, life-long learning, student cognitive skills, and civic skills. Meanwhile, Seligman (2011) proposes five elements of well-being: positive emotion and feeling good, engagement, genuine relationships with others, purpose and meaningful existence, and a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction. In addition to these elements of well-being, we will also consider the external variables and context in which a teacher works and which influence their well-being. In sum, to achieve teacher well-being requires emotional support and the recognition of the teacher's role as crucial elements for promoting well-being, along with adequate working conditions and a positive school environment (Taylor et al., 2024).

In context, caring leadership that promotes teacher well-being must consider the abovementioned variables, while also acknowledging the importance of the teaching practice, job recognition, and the provision of the necessary job conditions for optimal teacher performance. Caring leadership promotes collective accountability, generating a sense of responsibility for the well-being of all of its members, because "principal caring also creates a climate of personal safety" (Smylie et al., 2016: 337), valuing teachers as key partners in the creation of a comprehensive learning environment, recognizing their unique talents, and allowing for authentic commitment to the children (Smit, 2018). There is no doubt that teachers' well-being increases when their opinions are taken into consideration.

Finally, it is important to note that caring leadership must not neglect or underestimate teacher well-being since it can affect students in multiple ways such as their own well-being, feeling of belonging, academic performance, and non-cognitive skills (Taylor et al., 2024). Improving teacher well-being also improves their agency and motivation towards the profession.

Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, a quantitative approach was followed (Bar, 2010), applying an international questionnaire, The Caring School Leadership Questionnaire (CSLQ) by Van der Vyver et al. (2014), originally designed for the South African context and later adapted and validated for the Chilean context as part of this study. The objective of this study was to determine to what extent school principals fulfill their caring function with respect to teachers. For this purpose, the perceptions of both teachers and school principals were measured with respect to the levels of care experienced. Survey research, described as the collection of information (in this case, opinions on giving and receiving care) from one or more surveyed groups (teachers and school principals), is performed by asking them questions and tabulating their responses. The questionnaire consists of three dimensions: psychological well-being, workplace, and school management.

The *psychological well-being* determinants are understood as emotional support and mutual respect, promoting appreciation, participation, and recognition of teachers and, of course, empathy within the educational community, for the purpose of generating motivation towards teaching, satisfaction, and a feeling of accomplishment among teachers (Gkonou and Miller, 2017; Kaynak, 2020; Porter et al., 2022).

The *workplace* dimension is understood as a safe and equitable space that facilitates the conditions for teachers' professional and personal development. It focuses on recognizing the importance of salary satisfaction, job security, and workload management (Häggström et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2024).

Finally, the *school management* dimension is understood as the way teams are empowered through inclusive decision-making, promoting a shared commitment to the collective values and objectives of the institution (Smylie et al., 2016).

Data collection process

The questionnaire is divided into two sections. The first collects the participants' biographical information, while the second section contains 66 items with statements that address the psychological, workplace/organizational, and management determinants mentioned above. For each statement, participants were asked to respond with: 1 not at all; 2 to a lesser extent; 3 to some extent; 4 to a large extent. Separate questionnaires were prepared for teachers and school principals. The items on the principals' questionnaire addressed exactly the same determinants as the items on the teachers' questionnaire, but they were formulated in such a way that principals and teachers could respond from their own perspectives.

Application

The study population included school principals and teachers from educational institutions in Chile's Metropolitan Region, which consists of 52 districts and 2893 schools. This region is

Table 1. Differences in questionnaire dimension averages between principals and teachers.

Dimension	Participant	Average	*p*	*D*
Psychological well-being	Principals	3.77	<.0001	1.24***
	Teachers	3.00		
Workplace	Principals	3.87	<.0001	1.17***
	Teachers	3.21		
Management	Principals	3.80	<.0001	1.33***
	Teachers	3.05		

Source: own elaboration.

home to nearly half of Chile's population, making it a significant area for educational research. Based on statistical calculations, a random sample was selected of 332 principals and 333 teachers. It should be noted that the participants did not necessarily come from the same schools. This sample was designed to be representative of the Metropolitan Region, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error for both groups.

Table 1 displays the differences in average questionnaire scores between principals and teachers across three dimensions: psychological well-being, workplace, and management.

The questionnaire was administered online to participants between July and September 2023. The respondents were invited to participate and informed of its purpose at the beginning of the questionnaire. Once the data were collected, they were downloaded into a matrix and entered into statistical analysis software, R version 4.3.2.

Questionnaire validity

To correctly adapt the CSLQ, originally written in English for a South African context, to Spanish and a specifically Chilean context, a five-step method was followed. First, two translators (one general translator and one specialized in educational research) performed the initial translation. Their versions were later compared to resolve any discrepancies and produce a final version in Spanish. Then, a back translation was performed to validate the conceptual reliability of the questionnaire, adjusting minor details as indicated by the back translator. Following this procedure, three experts in school leadership and educational psychology reviewed the instrument and suggested modifications to be made. Finally, a pilot study was carried out with 340 teachers from the Metropolitan Region, evaluating the reliability and validity of the questionnaire through factor analysis and other statistical indicators, ultimately confirming the suitability of the translated instrument for the Spanish-speaking cultural context.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire, evaluated using statistical analysis, confirmed the accuracy of the translated instrument. The results provide preliminary evidence that the CSLQ is appropriate for evaluating the caring leadership styles within the Chilean educational context, respecting its specific cultural characteristics. To determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated and found to all be higher than 0.8 (Oviedo and Campo-Arias, 2005).

Analysis of results

Principals have a significantly better perception of psychological well-being (average of 3.77) compared to teachers (average of 3.00). This difference is significant, and the magnitude of its effect is

large, according to Cohen. This indicates that school principals perceive that they provide considerably more care in terms of psychological well-being than what teachers perceive to be given.

Principals see the workplace as significantly more positive (average of 3.87) than teachers (average of 3.21). This difference is statistically significant, resulting in a value of 1.17 and a large effect, which shows that principals believe that they are creating a more caring and supportive workplace than what teachers perceive.

Finally, school principals have a significantly better perception regarding management (average of 3.80) compared to teachers (average of 3.05). This difference is also statistically significant, obtaining a value of 1.33 and an even greater effect in this dimension. Principals believe that they exhibit a high level of care in their management, while teachers perceive a significantly lower quality of management.

Analysis of the results by dimension

An interesting pattern to note is that across all indicators presented, school principals systematically perceive that they are doing better in comparison to what is perceived by teachers. The following highlights the indicators that show the greatest and smallest differences for each dimension. Their statistical significance was validated using the T-test for each questionnaire item.

Psychological well-being

With respect to the greatest differences, Table 2 provides Welch's *t*-test results for two independent samples, in this case, between the principals and teachers for the care indicators. The averages compare the principals' and teachers' evaluations for the same care categories, which indicate how each group perceives different aspects of their workplace. For all cases presented, the P-value indicates that the frequencies are statistically significant.

Specifically, Table 2 shows the indicators that present the greatest differences between principals' and teachers' perceptions of psychological well-being in the educational context. The indicator that presents the greatest difference is recognition of achievements and contributions. Principals tend to believe that they properly recognize teachers' work, with an average of 3.89, while teachers feel like they receive less recognition, with an average of 2.75.

The indicator with the second greatest difference is interest shown towards teachers as human beings. Principals perceive that they show a high level of interest in their teachers (average of 3.87), but teachers do not perceive such interest as positively (average of 2.87). The difference

Table 2. Greatest differences in psychological well-being averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Recognition of achievements and contributions.	2.75	3.89	−18.48	<.0001	−1.14
Interest shown towards teachers as human beings.	2.87	3.87	−15.47	<.0001	−1.01
Interest in teachers' experiences.	2.83	3.82	−15.37	<.0001	−0.98
Genuine concern for the work team.	2.98	3.90	−16.21	<.0001	−0.92
Appreciation of teachers' ideas.	2.95	3.87	−15.81	<.0001	−0.92

Source: Own elaboration.

of 1.01 points indicates that school principals believe they are more personally interested in their teachers than what teachers perceive. The perception of interest in teachers' experiences also shows a noticeable difference.

Principals believe that they are interested in their teachers' experiences, with an average of 3.82, while teachers perceive a lower level of interest, with an average of 2.83, and a discrepancy of 0.98 points.

In terms of genuine concern for the work team, principals believe they demonstrate a greater concern for their team (average of 3.90) compared to what teachers perceive (average of 2.98), with a difference of 0.92 points.

Finally, in terms of the appreciation of teachers' ideas, principals believe that they consider their teachers' ideas to be important (average of 3.87), while teachers feel like their ideas are not as highly valued (average of 2.95). The difference of 0.92 points indicates a misalignment in the perception of the importance of teachers' ideas.

With respect to the smallest differences, Table 3 shows that principals feel that they trust teachers (average of 3.62), while teachers perceive such trust but to a lesser extent (average of 3.15). The difference of 0.47 points is the smallest among the indicators under analysis, indicating that trust is a relative strength in the principal-teacher relationship, although it still shows room for improvement.

Principals perceive that they accept teachers as they are (average of 3.70), while teachers perceive this acceptance positively, though to a slightly less degree (average of 3.21). The difference of 0.50 points indicates that while there is a gap, this is the second smallest gap in the entire dimension.

Principals believe that they demonstrate a high level of respect (average of 3.97), while teachers also perceive a high level of respect (average of 3.44). This case presents the highest average for both teachers and principals. On the other hand, principals consider that they have a greater ability to control their emotions (average of 3.84) compared to what teachers perceive (average of 3.28), with a difference of 0.56 points.

Finally, both principals and teachers recognize warmth in their relationship, although principals believe they demonstrate more warmth (average of 3.86) than what teachers perceive (average of 3.24), yielding a difference of 0.62 points.

Workplace

In relation to the greatest differences, Table 4 presents the workplace indicators where the perception differences between principals and teachers are the most pronounced. These indicators are centered around workplace support, appreciation for teachers' work, and the protection of teachers'

Table 3. Smallest differences in psychological well-being averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Warmth towards teachers.	3.24	3.86	−11.32	<.0001	−0.62
Ability to control emotions.	3.28	3.84	−10.88	<.0001	−0.56
Respect for teachers.	3.44	3.97	−11.48	<.0001	−0.52
Acceptance of teachers as they are.	3.21	3.70	−8.67	<.0001	−0.50
Trust placed in teachers.	3.15	3.62	−7.75	<.0001	−0.47

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4. Greatest differences in workplace averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Support in job responsibilities.	3.05	3.91	−15.71	<.0001	−0.86
Appreciation for teachers' work.	3.12	3.92	−14.67	<.0001	−0.8
Protection of teachers' rights.	3.26	3.97	−13.85	<.0001	−0.71

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5. Smallest differences in workplace averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Contribution to the well-being of the school community.	3.25	3.79	−9.65	<.0001	−0.54
Delegation of significant tasks.	3.33	3.85	−10.02	<.0001	−0.52
Empowerment through participative decision-making.	3.39	3.89	−9.73	<.0001	−0.5

Source: own elaboration.

rights. Principals believe they offer a high level of support for their teachers (average of 3.91), while teachers perceive significantly less support (average of 3.05), with a difference of 0.86 points.

Similarly, principals feel like they express a great appreciation for their teachers' work (average of 3.92), but teachers perceive less appreciation (average of 3.12), yielding a difference of 0.80 points. Principals consider that they protect teachers' rights (average of 3.97), while teachers perceive this protection to a lesser extent (average of 3.26), for a difference of 0.71 points.

With respect to the smallest differences, Table 5 presents the workplace indicators where there is a smaller gap between principals' and teachers' perceptions. Principals believe that they empower their teachers through participative decision-making (average of 3.89), while teachers also recognize this empowerment, although to a lesser degree (average of 3.39), for a difference of 0.50 points.

Principals consider that they delegate important tasks to teachers (average of 3.85), while teachers perceive this but to a slightly lesser extent (average of 3.33), generating a difference of 0.52 points. Both principals and teachers recognize that principals work to benefit the school community, although this is perceived by principals to a higher extent (average of 3.79) than by teachers (average of 3.25), for a difference of 0.54 points.

Management

Regarding the greatest differences, Table 6 shows the management indicators where the perception differences between principals and teachers are the most pronounced. Principals believe they manage conflicts fairly (average of 3.72), while teachers perceive this ability to a much lesser extent (average of 2.7). The difference of 1.02 points makes this indicator the one with the greatest difference. Principals feel like they make sure to maintain infrastructure in good working condition (average of 3.77), while teachers do not perceive this in the same way (average of 2.79), for a difference of 0.98 points.

Table 6. Greatest differences in management averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Fair handling of conflict.	2.7	3.72	−15.66	<.0001	−1.02
Maintaining school infrastructure.	2.79	3.77	−14.95	<.0001	−0.98
Offer of training opportunities.	2.9	3.89	−16.47	<.0001	−0.98
Defense of teachers in the face of difficulty.	2.95	3.89	−16.13	<.0001	−0.94
Willingness to make personal sacrifices.	3.02	3.92	−14.88	<.0001	−0.9

Source: own elaboration.

Table 7. Smallest differences in management averages between teachers and principals.

Indicator	Teacher average	Principal average	T	p	Difference
Shared leadership responsibilities.	3.35	3.92	−11.89	<.0001	−0.58
Personal support for teachers.	3.01	3.57	−7.43	<.0001	−0.56
Professional development support.	3.39	3.95	−12.04	<.0001	−0.56
Maintaining a safe work environment.	3.32	3.87	−10.98	<.0001	−0.55
Limitation of vandalism at school.	3.46	3.95	−10.64	<.0001	−0.49

Source: own elaboration.

Principals believe they offer sufficient opportunities for training (average of 3.89), while teachers feel like these opportunities are only offered to a certain extent (average of 2.9), with a difference of also 0.98 points. Principals believe they adequately defend teachers (average of 3.89), while teachers feel like this defense only occurs to a limited degree (average of 2.95), yielding a difference of 0.94 points. Principals believe they are willing to make personal sacrifices (average of 3.92), while teachers only perceive this willingness to a certain extent (average of 3.02), with a difference of 0.9 points.

With respect to the smallest differences, Table 7 shows the management indicators where there is less of a gap between principals' and teachers' perceptions. Principals believe they effectively limit vandalism at schools (average of 3.95), and teachers also perceive this similarly (average of 3.46). The difference of 0.49 points is the smallest gap among the indicators under analysis. On the other hand, principals feel like they maintain a safe work environment (average of 3.87), and teachers perceive this similarly (average of 3.32), for a difference of 0.55 points.

Principals consider that they support teachers' professional development (average of 3.95), and teachers perceive this similarly (average of 3.39), with a difference of 0.56 points.

Principals believe that they offer a good level of personal support (average of 3.57), although this is the indicator with the lowest score in the entire questionnaire applied to principals, while teachers perceive such support to a lesser extent (average of 3.01). The difference is 0.56 points, although as indicated, the averages are comparatively lower for both groups compared to the other indicators.

Principals believe that they share leadership responsibilities (average of 3.92), and teachers also perceive this positively (average of 3.35), for a difference of 0.58 points.

When comparing the tables, the greatest differences in perception can be found in conflict management, infrastructure maintenance, training, defense of teachers, and willingness to make personal

sacrifices. In contrast, the smallest differences are seen in shared leadership responsibilities, professional development support, maintaining a safe work environment, and the limitation of vandalism.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this questionnaire reflect a pattern that appears across all indicators: school principals perceive that their performance related to care practices is better than teachers' perception thereof. This suggests that there may be a general trend among principals to overestimate the effectiveness of their actions and positive impact of their interventions in the well-being and management of their communities which, in the teachers' opinion, might not be entirely correct.

This is seen in the findings, as there are several indicators that present significant discrepancies between the perceptions of principals and teachers in relation to caring leadership. These differences can be grouped into the following areas:

–*Recognition and personal support*, including the following indicators: recognition of achievements and contributions, interest shown towards teachers as human beings, support for realizing personal goals, and genuine concern for the work team. As observed in the results, there is a wide discrepancy between how principals perceive that they support and appreciate teachers and how teachers feel that they are supported and appreciated. This is interesting to analyze, since the evidence shows that teacher well-being is a topic that might be underestimated by school leaders. It can be inferred that there is a tendency to ignore the human side of teachers, who feel less valued and respected, and this undoubtedly affects their well-being (Kaynak, 2020). Within this context, doubts arise around whether Chilean educational leaders are effectively promoting teacher well-being, since emotional support and recognition of teachers' role are crucial to their well-being (Taylor et al., 2024). In this case, teachers' perceptions fall below the levels that would be expected from caring leadership (Wall, 2020).

The responses with the lowest percentages are tied to aspects that involve personal life and recognition of achievements and contributions, as well as aspects related to the interest and concern shown towards teachers.

–*Resource management,* including the following indicators: maintaining school infrastructure, availability of materials and technological resources, and offer of training opportunities. Principals tend to overestimate the effectiveness of their management of physical and human resources when compared to teachers' perceptions. This could indicate that principals are not fully aware of the operational deficiencies or the daily challenges faced by teachers. This should not be the case since one caring leadership practice is to generate supportive organizational conditions and develop contexts for care beyond the school (Smylie et al., 2016). In this sense, we can highlight the importance of understanding which factors generate differences in perception and try to solve them, since just like the organizational and social aspects of the workplace, these, too, are important for employee well-being (Taylor et al., 2024). The principals are the ones who should ensure that the minimum material conditions are in place for teacher development (Barcelona et al., 2022) in order to allow for student learning, which is why it is fundamental for teachers to have the resources and external support structures that provide such care (Häggström et al., 2020).

–*Leader commitment to and defense of teachers*, including the following indicators: fair handling of conflict, defense of teachers in the face of difficulty, and willingness to make personal sacrifices. While principals believe they are willing to defend and make sacrifices for their

teams, teachers perceive these efforts as insufficient. This area reflects principals' need to not only commit through words, but also to demonstrate strong support and defense of teachers in practice, especially in the face of difficult times, since they need to promote a positive school climate (Taylor et al., 2024). Principals believe they are providing a high level of support and protection, but teachers do not perceive these efforts similarly, therefore, it is necessary to more deeply promote the social, psychological, and emotional benefits obtained from caring relationships within educational communities (Smylie et al., 2016: 7). It is interesting to observe these differences between principals and teachers, since they reveal that the appreciation of and support for teachers' work continues to remain at the margin of school leadership practices, once again causing one to question how caring leadership is being carried out in educational communities. This is particularly important considering that the literature provides evidence that in order to develop a culture of care, a leader must act with both empathy and a real understanding of the needs of the people within the organization to ensure that they feel valued and supported (Smit, 2018).

–*Professional development support*. Personal support for teachers and professional development are critical to growth and job satisfaction. The existence of differences here suggests that while principals believe they are being supportive, teachers do not feel the same level of support, which may influence their professional development and job satisfaction. In this sense, principals must support teachers' professional development, since the latter must be prepared to address student needs and learning difficulties in the classroom and offer them effective care (Largo Arenas et al., 2018). The areas with the most discrepancies in this regard tend to involve relational and subjective aspects such as personal recognition, interest in teachers' experiences, and support in the realization of personal goals. These subjective aspects are tied to the caring emotion, which is a key motivation to generate satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment among teachers and strengthen their agency (Gkonou and Miller, 2017; Porter et al., 2022).

In contrast, there are other indicators that present smaller differences between principals' and teachers' perceptions on caring leadership, which we can group into the following categories:

–*Acceptance and mutual respect*. Indicators such as trust placed in teachers, acceptance of teachers as they are, and respect for teachers show that, while there are differences, both groups rate these aspects positively. This suggests that there is a basic level of respect and acceptance between principals and teachers, although principals tend to perceive this to a greater extent. This is consistent with other studies that show the importance of promoting empathy and understanding in order to create environments that are caring, more inclusive, and sensitive to the different needs of the educational community (Carrasco and Barraza, 2020; Carrasco and Palma, 2024).

–*Delegation of tasks and participation*. Indicators including empowerment through participative decision-making, delegation of significant tasks, and contribution to the well-being of the school community reflect differences in how participation and contribution are perceived. These results may indicate that principals feel like they are more proactive in these roles, while teachers may not feel as empowered or engaged as principals seem to believe. However, the difference in averages is lower compared to other indicators, allowing us to infer that there are leadership practices in place that promote participation which are more recognized than other care practices. In this sense, it is fundamental to guarantee that teachers

can give their opinions and participate actively in decision-making processes (Taylor et al., 2024).

–*Safe workplace.* Limitation of vandalism at school and maintaining a safe work environment show that principals perceive themselves as effective in these areas, but teachers see room for improvement. Nevertheless, the results allow us to infer that their workplaces generate a feeling of safety, and we can conclude that school principals do have care practices in place in this area. This is concordant with literature that states that principals' caring also creates a climate of personal safety (Smylie et al., 2016). Principals are the ones who create the conditions for building stronger communities that feel safe (Barcelona et al., 2022).

Perception differences regarding certain caring leadership indicators are based on the complexity of care in terms of both relational and reflexive dynamics. For example, greater discrepancies in aspects such as personal recognition and emotional support could be explained by the fact that these elements require a closer and more regular interaction between principals and teachers, where the reciprocity of care plays a key role. According to Noddings (Noddings, 2002a), effective care is based on the leader's ability to recognize and respond to the emotional and professional needs of others. This is something which school principals may overestimate in their perception due to the absence of continuous feedback or an institutionalized process thereof. In fact, divergent perceptions on aspects related to infrastructure could be related to a gap in understanding of roles, where principals believe they have complied with the provision of resources from an administrative perspective, while teachers express a more critical perception due to the direct impact on their daily teaching tasks.

In contrast, the elements showing fewer differences, such as acceptance, mutual respect, and delegation of tasks, may be more formalized in organizational dynamics and even in labor legislation, which would facilitate a clearer consensus between principals and teachers. As Tronto (2018) notes, care is not merely a series of actions, but a complex set of institutional practices that manifest at both the interpersonal and organizational level. Thus, these elements that are more standardized in the organizational culture may tend to generate smaller disparities of perception.

In sum, it can be concluded that educational communities have the elements for developing a culture of care, especially mutual respect and job security, but there are several aspects that need to be improved, particularly in reference to teacher well-being. The results indicate that recognition of the teacher's role, appreciation of their work, and the need to strengthen their professional development to improve the teaching practice are key aspects when envisioning a community that promotes care.

To conclude, it is important to note that this article provides a look at teachers' perceptions of caring leadership and how these differ from the perceptions of the leaders themselves. One limitation of this study is that it recognizes a difference between the perceptions of different members of the school community but does not identify why these differences occur. This could be the subject of future research.

Moreover, it is important to consider the cultural and organizational frameworks and specific policies of each country. For example, the nature of more or less vertical hierarchical relations may influence how teachers perceive caring leadership, particularly with respect to values, social norms, and the authority's perceptions. Likewise, socioeconomic conditions and the availability of resources determine the effectiveness of teacher well-being, since in more impoverished contexts, school directors may feel pulled towards prioritizing basic needs over emotional and professional care.

Future studies could explore how these dynamics manifest in different contexts, in order to contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the universal and specific aspects of caring leadership.

While this study is focused on Chilean school communities, the findings on the discrepancies between principals' and teachers' perceptions may exist in other similar contexts. For example, the original survey also revealed similar differences between South African school principals and teachers (Van der Vyver et al., 2014).

We hope that the results of this article can serve as a basis for continuing to study this topic in depth and contribute to the discussion on public policies related to the ethics of care.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Andrea Carrasco Sáez ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3044-5639
Claudio Montoya Ojeda ⓘD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0921-5713

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Author biographies

Andrea Carrasco is the Professor of History and Social Sciences at the University of Valparaíso, Master in Education from the University of Chile and PhD in Education from the University of Granada, Spain. She is an academic at the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities of the University of Chile and director of the Centro Estudios Saberes Docentes of the same University. She is a researcher and part of the management team of C-Líder. She has published articles in several specialized journals and book chapters. Professor Carrasco has extensive experience in university teaching, both at the level of initial and continuing education, within the University of Chile and in other university spaces, which have allowed her to acquire knowledge and training in the areas of educational leadership, professional development of teachers, leadership and gender, leadership identity ancarrasco@uchile.cl Orcid https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3044-5639

Claudio Montoya is a sociologist with a Master's degree in Management and Public Policy from the University of Chile. He is currently a researcher at the Centro de Estudios Saberes Docentes of the same university. He has collaborated in several publications specialized in educational policies and educational leadership. In addition, he has worked as a consultant and researcher on multiple projects in Chile, focusing on educational policies and strategic planning in various public institutions. claudio.montoya@uchile.cl