

Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Education in Lithuania

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Abstract:- Inclusive education is a keyword in educational systems in many countries at present including Lithuania. It is not only an approach in teaching, but also a different organization of education in national systems. In order to make this type of education successful, it is necessary to create a welcoming classroom environment for learners with disabilities, to link general and special education systems, to develop and implement curricula effectively, to take an interactive approach to disability and disabled learners. At the same time it is important to differentiate education, to evaluate and record children's individual cognition and the effectiveness of positive assistance, to improve the competence of teachers and support specialists as a key element in ensuring optimal teaching and learning process, to improve inter – institutional cooperation and the usage of resources purposefully. The study involves teachers with different backgrounds, professional qualifications and involvement in inclusive education and focuses on teachers' subjective self-assessment of attitudes in Lithuania towards the implementation of the inclusive education in the context of a three-dimensional model, which includes the affective, behavioural and cognitive indicators. The Technical Manual for Attitudes Towards Teaching All Students Instrument (Gregory & Noto, 2012) was applied in the study. For statistical analysis of the research data, the SPSS 25.0 program, the Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation Test were used. The results of the study reveal Lithuanian teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of the inclusive education and the interaction of influencing factors.

Keywords: *inclusive education, behaviour components, teacher's attitude, pupils with special needs, special competence.*

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years in Lithuania, implementation of the concept of inclusive education was discussed for a very long time and, finally, in June 2020, the Seimas of Lithuania adopted amendments to the Law on Education, thus creating legal preconditions to gradually increase the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the education system till the September 1st, 2024. Although the amendment to the law has been passed, the municipalities, schools and communities still have a lot of work to do and prepare for it. Inclusive education aims to remove physical, emotional, informational, and social barriers, and provide quality education for every child at their nearest educational institution together with their peers, with all the support necessary for their individual needs to be met. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the support system at schools, employ more educational support professionals and teaching assistants, adapt the school environment for inclusive education, and improve the qualification and competences of all teachers for work in the classroom with children with special educational needs [1], [2].

This means that educational institutions will have to meet the needs of all community members, accessible for students with mobility problems and for children with developmental or learning disabilities, who experience sensory and emotional issues, so that they are provided with safe spaces to destress and relax and with clear visual and audio directions.

At present there are still 44 special schools in Lithuania, where more than 3,000 students with high and very high special educational needs study, and another 1,500 such children attend special pre-school education institutions.

There are also about 40,000 students in general education schools who have a variety of other special educational needs, and it is about a tenth of all students in Lithuania. Therefore, in order to ensure equal opportunities for children with various types of special needs to study in any educational institution with other students, further efforts are still needed to implement inclusive education measures and minimize barriers to learning for students with special needs.

In the process of recent systemic conceptualizations of inclusive education, teachers' attitude, or a viewpoint towards an idea of the concept of inclusion and its implementation was revealed as one of the most significant challenges [3]-[6]. This is confirmed by many studies that, along with professional knowledge, motivation and self-reflection abilities, the attitude of teachers plays an important role in the implementation of inclusive education [7; 8; 9]. An attitude is formed from cognitive, affective and behavior components and influences the individual's thoughts and actions [10]-[15].

The study reveals teachers' attitudes as a basic component in ensuring optimal teaching and learning. In this context, an attitude is a state of mind which can improve or decrease motivation to be more creative, communicate more effectively and produce more effort for the benefit of pupils and educational institutions.

The aim of the research is to examine the teachers' subjective self-assessment of attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education in the context of a three-dimensional model, which includes both the affective perception assertions of the inclusion process and the reactive, behavioral, and cognitive indicators of attitude. Two research questions are set: to analyze the attitude of the teachers towards the inclusion of children with special needs and determine what factors affect the teachers' attitudes.

2. Methodology

The questionnaire "Attitudes Towards Teaching All Students" by Jess L. Gregory & Lori A. Noto was used for data collection. According to the questionnaire data analysis methodology, three subscales and their descriptive statements were considered: 1) Believing all students can succeed in general education classrooms; 2) Developing personal and professional relationships; 3) Creating an accepting environment for all students to learn. Data were coded using a Likert scale, where 1 - completely disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - partially disagree, 4 - neither agree nor disagree (neutral attitude), 5 - partially agree, 6 - disagree, 7 - completely agree.

Data were processed in SPSS 25.0 program. At the beginning of data processing, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to test internal consistency, and the obtained result ($\alpha = .759$) indicates good internal consistency. The Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation Test were used.

Characteristics of the respondents

In total 100 respondents answered the questions of the questionnaire: most respondents (90%) are women and come from urban areas. They mostly are subject (49%) and primary education teachers (35%) with bachelor and master's degree. Among those who indicated other education 6% of the respondents are students, whereas 3% represent other groups involved in implementation of educational processes.

3. Data Analysis and Results

Analysing the results, the Descriptive Statistics test is used. The mean values of the subscales and their characteristic statements have been determined (see Table I).

Table I. Mean Values for Subscale Statements

Subscale title	Descriptive statement
Believing all students can succeed in general education classrooms	Most or all special classrooms for children with mild or moderately severe developmental disabilities should be closed
	Students with mild to moderate disabilities should be taught in regular classes with nondisabled students because they will not require too much of the teacher's time

Subscale title	Descriptive statement
	Students with mild to moderate disabilities can be more effectively educated in regular classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms
Developing personal and professional relationships	I want professional support from a teacher-consultant (mentor) who can effectively provide differentiated learning for different groups of children.
	I want to be a teacher who knows how to develop an individual education plan for inclusion of pupils with mild and moderate disabilities
	I believe that inclusive education can help pupils with mild to moderate disabilities learn more effectively the social skills they need to live in society.
Creating an accepting environment for all students to learn	I believe I can create an emotionally supportive classroom environment for students with mild to moderate disabilities
	Pupils with mild to moderate developmental disabilities can be assigned classroom duties
	All pupils with mild to moderate disabilities should be educated in inclusive classrooms with non-disabled peers as far as possible

The test shows that there are differences in respondents' evaluation of the statements. The highest mean value is given to the statement *I want professional support from a teacher-consultant (mentor) who can effectively provide differentiated learning for different groups of children* from the subscale *Developing personal and professional relationships*. The lowest mean value is given to the statement *Most or all special classrooms for children with mild or moderately severe developmental disabilities should be closed* in the subscale *Believing all students can succeed in general education classrooms*. It demonstrates fairly positive attitude towards inclusive education, and it confirms that professional support from colleagues are important in the inclusive education system.

Pearson's correlation test shows intercorrelations among the indicators. (see Table I). When analyzing the statements in the subscale *Believing all students can succeed in general education classrooms* statistically significant differences in the indicators have been found depending on respondents' professional qualifications, academic degree, experience, location of the workplace, workload, status of the school and its material provision (see Table II).

Table II. Statements Characterizing the Subscale *Believing All Students Can Succeed in General Education Classrooms*

Indicators	Descriptive statement		
	Most or all special classrooms for children with mild or moderately severe developmental disabilities should be closed	Students with mild to moderate disabilities should be taught in regular classes with nondisabled students because they will not require too much of the teacher's time	Students with mild to moderate disabilities can be more effectively educated in regular classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms
Professional qualification	.006	-	-
Academic degree	.043	-	-
Pedagogical experience	-	.000	-
Location of the workplace	-	-	.034
Workload	.025		
Way of obtaining professional qualification	-	-	-
Status of the school	-	.030	-
Material provision	.017	.006	-

Statistically significant differences if $p > .05$

In the evaluation of the statement *Most of all special classrooms for children with mild or moderately severe developmental disabilities should be closed* statistically significant differences were found depending on:

- the qualification of the respondents ($p = .006$): support staff (Mean 5.14) and primary education teachers (Mean 4.06) agree with the statement more often, but students disagree (Mean 1.670) and subject teachers are also quite negative (Mean 3.61);
- education ($p = .043$): a high average value is for respondents who did not indicate the level of education (Mean 6.00), followed by respondents with a bachelor's degree (Mean 3.91), a lower rating is for respondents who indicated another option (Mean 2.45);
- workload for working with children with special needs ($p = .025$). Respondents who work 2-10 hours a month (Mean 4.54) and more than 80 hours a month (Mean 4.17) are the most supportive of the statement, those who do not currently provide education for children with special needs are the ones who are in denial (Mean 3.04);
- material provision of the school ($p = .017$): respondents who work in schools with sufficient provision agree more often (Mean 4.13) but teachers whose schools have insufficient provision are more negative (Mean 3.06).

When evaluating the statement *Students with mild to moderate disabilities should be taught in regular classes with nondisabled students because they will not require too much of the teacher's time* statistically significant differences in the respondents' answers were found depending on:

- experience ($p = .000$): the greatest support for the statement is in the group of respondents with work experience from 10 to 14 years (Mean 5.29), negative attitude is expressed by respondents with 20 and more years of experience (Mean 3.19);
- the status of the school ($p = .030$): respondents working in primary schools have more positive attitude (Mean 4.40), those working in secondary schools express more negative attitude (Mean 2.00);
- material provision of the school ($p = .006$): respondents agree more often in schools whose resources are maximally provided and allow flexible improvement of the educational process (Mean 4.80), teachers whose schools are insufficiently provided are more negative (Mean 3.12).

Regarding the statement *Students with mild to moderate disabilities can be more effectively educated in regular classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms* statistically significant differences were found depending on the location of the workplace ($p = .034$). Mean of the responses of those working in cities is 4.38, while those respondents who work between the city and the countryside do not agree with this statement (Mean 2.67).

The subscale *Developing personal and professional relationships* showed statistically significant differences depending on the respondents' qualifications and experience (see Table III).

In the statement *I would like to receive professional support from a teacher-consultant (mentor) who can effectively provide a differentiated learning process for different groups of children*, statistically significant ($p = .048$) differences were found depending on the respondents' qualifications: students (Mean 6.33) and support staff (Mean 6.14) agreed more, also subject teachers (Mean 5.29), less often those who indicated the other option (Mean 4.67) The evaluation of the statement *I want to be a teacher who knows how to develop an individual education plan appropriate for the inclusion of pupils with mild and moderate developmental disabilities* showed statistically significant ($p = .022$) differences depending on respondents' experience in the education system: respondents with up to 4 years of experience (Mean 6.43) agreed more often, respondents with 20+ years of experience (Mean 5.26) agreed less often.

Table III. Statements Characterizing the Subscale *Developing Personal and Professional Relationships*

Indicators	I want professional support from a teacher-consultant (mentor) who can effectively provide a differentiated learning process for different groups of children	I want to be a teacher who knows how to develop an individual education plan for inclusion of pupils with mild and moderate disabilities	I believe that inclusive education can help pupils with mild to moderate disabilities learn more effectively the social skills they need to live in society
Qualification	.048	-	-
Experience	-	.022	.047

The statement *I believe that in inclusive education students with mild to moderate disabilities can learn social skills necessary for life in society* more effectively showed statistically significant ($p = .047$) differences depending on the respondents' experience in the education system: respondents with 10-14 years of experience (Mean 5.17) agreed more often, respondents with 15-19 years of experience (Mean 4.61) and 20+ years of experience (Mean 4.67) agreed less often.

The assessment of the statements in the *Creating an accepting environment for all students to learn* subscale showed statistically significant differences depending on respondents' experience, type of professional qualification and planned time to work in the future.

Table IV. Statements Characterizing the Subscale *Creating an Accepting Environment for All Students to Learn*

Indicators	I believe I can create an emotionally supportive classroom environment for students with mild and moderate disabilities	Students with mild to moderate developmental disabilities can be assigned classroom duties	All students with mild to moderate disabilities should be educated in inclusive classrooms with non-disabled peers as far as possible
Experience	.000	.001	.000
Type of professional qualification	-	-	.039
Planned time to work in the future	-	-	.015

The statement *I believe I can create an emotionally supportive classroom environment for students with mild and moderate disabilities* showed statistically significant differences ($p = .000$) by experience: respondents with up to 4 years of experience agreed more with the statement (Mean 6.29). As experience increases, agreement with the statement decreases, with the lowest mean (4.70) for respondents with 20+ years of experience

For the statement *Students with mild to moderate developmental disabilities can be assigned classroom responsibilities*, statistically significant differences ($p = .001$) are found by experience: respondents with up to 4 years of experience (Mean 6.00) and respondents with 10-14 years of experience (Mean 6.18) agree more with the statement, the lowest mean value (4.78) is for respondents with 20+ years of experience

The evaluation of the statement *All students with mild to moderate disabilities should be educated in inclusive classrooms with non-disabled peers as far as possible*:

- statistically significant differences ($p = .000$) by experience: respondents with up to 4 years of experience (Mean 5.71) and respondents with 10-14 years of experience (Mean 5.53) agree more with the statement; respondents with 20+ years of experience have the lowest mean (4.04)
- - statistically significant differences ($p = .039$) according to the way in which the professional qualification was obtained: respondents who indicate another way of obtaining the professional qualification (Mean 45.58) or obtained it exclusively through practical work (Mean 4.62) are more likely

to agree with the statement, while respondents who obtained the professional qualification exclusively through further training courses (Mean 4.00) are less likely;

- statistically significant differences ($p = .015$) according to the length of time they plan to work in education: respondents who did not indicate how long they plan to work in education (Mean 6.00) and those who plan to work for more than 20 years (Mean 5.15) are more likely to agree, while those who plan to work for less than 5 years (Mean 4.10) are less likely to agree.

The assessment of the statements in the *Creating an accepting environment for all students to learn* subscale showed statistically significant differences depending on respondents' experience, type of professional qualification and planned time to work in the future.

4. Conclusions

The quality of inclusive education relies on qualified teachers who are committed to continuous professional development. Educators and support staff involved in the education process need a set of skills to provide support to all learners who need it. At the same time, it is important to create a consistent expanding network of institutions fostering inclusive education and developing universal design.

The study on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion reveals a realistic picture of the implementation opportunities in a school context. Therefore, starting points can be found to enrich the debate with empirically obtained data.

Inclusion in education is rooted in the belief that every child can learn and realize his/her full potential if provided equal opportunities to participate in school, supported with resources required and taught in a manner appropriate to his/her needs. Beliefs include cognitive, affective and behavior components.

The dominant factors can be identified influencing the attitudes of teachers involved in the implementation of inclusive education. These include the acquired education, professional qualification, workload, the location of the workplace and its material provision.

Inclusion in education is an ongoing value process seeking to strengthen schools and teachers as much as possible in order to achieve the best opportunities for all children. No country has yet achieved ideal inclusion, and Lithuania will not achieve perfect inclusion in 2024.

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