Article

Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Education: Latvian and Lithuanian Experiences

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Abstract: Inclusive education is a continuous process of transformation of the education system. It is both an approach to teaching and learning, as well as a different organization of the educational process that welcomes all students regardless of their social skills and physical and intellectual abilities. The qualitative implementation of inclusive education requires competent staff. The study reflects a comparative study carried out in Latvia and Lithuania, and it focuses on Latvian and Lithuanian teachers' attitude self-assessment regarding the implementation of inclusive education. A three-dimensional model, including the cognitive, affective, and behaviour components, are used for the study. The Technical Manual for Attitudes Towards Teaching All Students Instrument developed by Gregory Jess L. and Noto Lori A. has been applied in the study. The SPSS 25.0 programme, Pearson Correlation, and One-Way ANOVA tests were used for the statistical analysis of the data. The results reveal, and generally confirm, differences in the structure of Latvian and Lithuanian teachers' attitudes, as well as emphasize the importance of teachers and support specialists' competence improvement to ensure optimal teaching and learning processes for all learners involved in the educational process.

Keywords: inclusive education; pupils with special needs; teachers' attitude; teachers' competence

1. Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is a global movement, and its importance has been debated for several decades now in different education communities (Sharma et al. 2008). The pedagogical approach of IE is based on the efforts of social justice to ensure access to education based on the conditions that are equal for all and promote a better life in society.

Hornby (2015) considers IE as a multi-dimensional concept that emphasises the value of diversity, including the issues regarding human rights, social justice, and equity. In school, it means the creation of classrooms where diversity is valued and considered a strength (Sharma et al. 2021). In this regard, inclusive pedagogy tries to prevent discriminatory attitudes, build inclusive communities, and improve the quality and effectiveness of pedagogy for all students (Munoz 2007; Salazar et al. 2009).

Clear quality standards must be introduced for the implementation of IE, and they must provide all learners with appropriate and flexible curricula, value diversity and individual strengths and challenges, use different learning and teaching methods and reflection, as well as encourage collaboration among students, teachers, families, professionals, and institutions (Florian 2015; Salend 2011; Schuelka 2018).

Research confirms that the quality of teaching and students' learning are mutually dependent on each other, and teachers' competence and attitudes influence the extent to which teachers are willing and able to implement inclusive practices for students with and without special education needs (SEN). There appears to be sufficient indication that

teachers' attitudes, along with professional knowledge, motivation, and self-reflection abilities, play important roles in the implementation of IE (De Boer 2012; Eberwein and Knauer 2009; Gasteiger-Klicpera et al. 2013; Haug 2017; Hollenweger et al. 2015).

Research findings confirm that both teachers' competence and attitudes, including beliefs, knowledge and understanding, teaching, training, and research competence, as well as intra and interpersonal relationships, are of great importance in the successful inclusion of children with SEN in regular classrooms (Avramidis et al. 2000; De Boer et al. 2012; Eleweke and Rodda 2010; Emam and Farrell 2009; Engelbrecht 2013; Hornby 2015; Johnstone and Chapman 2009; Ianes et al. 2020; Mittler 2000; Pit-ten Cate et al. 2018; Poornima et al. 2020; Rose 2010; Stegemann and Jaciw 2018).

The analysis of several scientific studies reveals the differences in an IE environment creation in different European countries. They are based on the diversity of historical traditions, cultures, economic conditions, and political decisions (Hardy and Woodcock 2015; Mitchell 2014). However, countries and educational institutions can learn from each other.

The research presented in this publication has been focused on the study of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in Latvia (LV) and Lithuania (LT). This is a unique case since the two countries are located geographically close to each other and have a similar history of education system development. During the Soviet Union era, both LV and LT had a well-established system of special education, while the development of inclusive education was expanded after regaining independence in the early 1990s of the previous century.

The political framework in both countries is similar: the number of children enrolled in mainstream schools is increasing, special schools are being closed, and the functions of existing schools are being expanded to promote IE. The goals of IE are aimed towards (a) removing barriers, such as physical, emotional, and social, and (b) providing quality education and necessary support for every learner at their nearest educational institution. Therefore, there is a need to expand the support system in schools, hire more educational support professionals and teaching assistants to schools, adapt the school environment for inclusive education, and improve the qualifications of all teachers, as well as their competence, so that they can work in the classroom with children with special educational needs (Gaižiūnas 2022; Lisauskienė 2018).

According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2021), LT teachers appear satisfied with the training they received; however, some areas of professional development can still be improved, particularly teaching in different settings that are multicultural and multilingual, as well as teaching children with SEN. A study conducted by researchers from LT and Finland also reveals the challenges that primary and subject teachers experience in Lithuanian schools due to the limited knowledge about SEN and the methods used in various situations (Lakkala et al. 2019).

Conversely, in Latvia, IE has been defined as one of the development priorities of the education system in legislation and political planning documents for the last 20 years. Human and material resources have been mobilised for its implementation, but neverthe-less, this field is traditionally associated with special education. Following the regulatory conditions, it has been defined as a special type of general education that creates oppor-tunities and conditions for students with special needs to obtain education appropriate to their state of health, abilities, and level of development in any educational institution, while ensuring the students' pedagogical, psychological, and medical correction, as well as preparation for their work and life in society.

The Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia has recognised the need to improve systematic monitoring of the quality of education and the need to strengthen data quality through a better use of evidence in policymaking. New methodological materials were de-veloped to support teachers working with pupils with developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, hearing impairments, visual impairments, and autism. Still, there are inequalities identified between urban and rural schools, in terms of the

accessibility of licensed programmes, for learners with SEN (Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2021)). The findings of national research studies reveal that IE is not properly organised in LV due to legislative, financial, and teacher education matters, and the development of the support system is hampered by a lack of financial support (Rozenfelde 2016). The research is mainly devoted to the didactic aspects of inclusive education and teachers' professional competence, which is a challenge for the quality of IE. Despite those teachers who perceived themselves as having certain competencies for IE, the majority do not feel comfortable and confident in an inclusive classroom. Therefore, professional development programmes should include not only the development of general competencies but they should more fully target the specific competencies for IE (Beizītere et al. 2020; Konceptuālais ziņojums 2018; Nimante and Kokare 2022; Pētījums par bērniem ar speciālām vajadzībām 2017).

The scientific studies regarding IE reveal the structure of teachers' professional competence by emphasising personal qualities such as motivation, beliefs, values, and especially attitude, which is considered to be a basic component in ensuring optimal teaching and learning, and its structure includes cognitive, affective, and behavioural components (Baumert and Kunter 2006; Eagly and Chaiken 2005; Hellmich et al. 2016; Kullmann et al. 2015).

However, it is stated above that, in an IE environment, a positive teacher's attitude not only overcomes the existing problems but also promotes professional curiosity and motivation to look for more information and develop pedagogical strategies (Briñol and Petty 2005). A teacher's attitude formation depends on the interaction of both individual and social factors, such as professional experience, skills, self-confidence, assistance from the professional community, etc. (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; De Boer 2012; Hellmich et al. 2016; Urton et al. 2014).

The goal of the study is to assess teachers' attitudes, which include cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects, in the context of IE.

The research questions are: (1) What are teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN? (2) What are the factors that influence teachers' attitudes?

2. Materials and Methods

In LV and LT, the research on the attitude of teachers towards IE is not a sufficiently developed area of study, and there are no science-based research tools developed. At the same time, the discussions on improving the provision of IE are underway, and it is necessary to reflect on the situation in the international context. The questionnaire "Attitudes Towards Teaching All Students" by (Gregory and Noto 2012) has been used for data collection. The instrument has been described and validated in several publications, and it has proved to be reliable (Gregory and Noto 2012, 2019).

The questionnaire consists from three subscales and the statements that characterize the subscales: (1) *Believing all students can succeed in general education classrooms (First subscale)*, including the statements about the elimination of special classrooms for pupils with mild to moderate disabilities, the possibility to teach pupils with mild and moderate disabilities together with nondisabled pupils, and the benefits of being educated in regular classrooms; (2) *Developing personal and professional relationships (Second subscale)*, which is characterised by the respondent's desire to be mentored by a teacher who is competent in applying different pedagogical strategies, designing learning plans, and who believes that the integration of pupils in the regular education classrooms will help them to learn necessary social skills; (3) *Creating an accepting environment for all students to learn (Third subscale)*, which confirms the respondent's confidence in the ability to create a welcoming classroom environment for students with mild and moderate disabilities and trust them with different responsibilities in the classroom, as well as emphasises the belief that all students should be educated in regular classrooms to the fullest extent possible. The subscales will be referred to as the First, Second, and Third in the text below.

In the first stage, the determination of face and content validity took place—an expert was invited to check the readability, clarity, comprehensibility, accuracy, etc., of the survey and test–retest reliability—where 25 respondents were offered to fill out the questionnaire with an interval of 3 months, and the results (r = 0.802 and α > 0.70 in both measurements) confirm the validity of the questionnaire.

In the demographic part of the questionnaire, there are data of the respondents' professional qualifications, academic degrees, experiences, places of work, and workloads, as well as the status of the school and its material facilities. The data have been coded by applying the Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "completely disagree" and 7 to "completely agree".

The data have been processed in an SPSS 29.0 programme. At the beginning of data processing, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is calculated to test internal consistency, and the obtained result for the questionnaire is α = 0.759, whereas Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the statements is $0.718 \leq \alpha \leq 0.779$ and indicates good internal consistency. The effect size is medium (Cohen's d 0.5 < d < 0.80), and the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test shows that the data correspond to a normal distribution ($p > 0.05$), which allows the use of parametric tests. Levene's test shows that the variances of the subgroups are similar ($p > 0.05$). The Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlation Test, Independent—Sample T Test, and One-Way ANOVA tests have been applied.

3. Results

3.1. Characteristics of Latvian (LV) and Lithuanian (LT) Respondents' Groups

The survey was conducted in the 2020–2021 study year, and the questionnaires were sent to 300 LV and LT respondents. However, 376 answers from the respondents were received: 276 respondents were from Latvia, and 100 respondents were from Lithuania. Both groups have similar characteristics: most respondents (87.7% LV and 90% LT) are women and come from urban areas. They are, mostly, subject (51.4% LV and 49% LT) and primary education teachers (26.4% LV and 35% LT) with bachelor's and master's degrees. Among those who have indicated other education, 4.7% (LV) and 6% (LT) of the respondents are students, whereas 9.8% (LV) and 3% (LT) represent other groups involved in the implementation of educational processes.

3.2. Data Analysis

Analysing all LV and LT results, Pearson's correlation test shows intercorrelations between the subscales that are closer for Lithuanian than for Latvian respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1. Intercorrelations between subscales.

Subscale		First		Second	
		LV	LT	LV	LT
First	Pearson Correlation	0.327	0.433	0.395	0.546
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Second	Pearson Correlation	1	1	0.460	0.641
	Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	0.000

Among the LV respondents, no correlation is observed between the answers regarding the First subscale and the respondents' qualifications. However, the correlation is present between the Third subscale and the respondents' experiences (r = −0.158, $p = 0.009$) and workplace locations (r = 0.174, $p = 0.004$). The Third subscale correlates only with the number of years respondents plan to work in an educational institution (r = −0.129, $p = 0.032$).

Among the LT respondents, the correlation is observed between the answers regarding the First subscale and the location of the workplace (r = −0.202, $p = 0.044$), amount of

workload (r = −0.217, *p* = 0.030), the status of the educational institution (r = −0.235, *p* = 0.019), and its material provisions (r = 0.311, *p* = 0.002). Moreover, both the Second (r = −0.213, *p* = 0.034) and the Third (r = −0.442, *p* = 000) subscales correlate with the respondents' pedagogical experiences.

The data acquired allow for the determination of the mean values of the subscales and the statements that characterise them by using the Descriptive Statistics test (see Table 2).

Table 2. Subscales and their mean values.

Subscale	Mean		*p*
	LV	LT	
First	2.94	4.30	0.000 [1]
Second	5.54	5.65	0.355
Third	5.26	5.35	0.398

[1] Statistically significant difference if *p* > 0.05.

In this study, special attention has been paid to the First subscale since it shows statistically lower value in the LV group compared to the LT group. Statistically significant differences are related to the type of professional qualification and the workload (see Table 3).

Table 3. Statements characterising the First subscale.

Indicators	Most or All Separate Classrooms for Children with Mild to Moderate 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 Mo-Derate Disabilities Can Be More Effectively Educated in Regular Classrooms as Opposed to Special Education Classrooms	
	LV	LT	LV	LT	LV	LT
Professional qualification	-	0.006	-	-	-	-
Academic degree	-	0.043	-	-	-	-
Pedagogical experience	-	-	-	0.000	-	-
Location of the workplace	-	-	-	-	-	0.034
Workload	0.000	0.025	0.002		0.000	
Way of the professional qualification acquisition	-	-	0.005	-	0.001	-
Status of the school	-	-	-	0.030	-	-
Material provision	-	0.017	-	0.006	-	-

3.3. Results

In the group of LV respondents, statistically significant differences have been found for the assessment of the First subscale (see Table 3), which depends on the type of professional qualification acquired and the workload. In the group of LT respondents, statistically significant differences have been found for the assessment of the First subscale, depending on the type of professional qualification, academic degree, experience, location of the workplace, workload, status of the school, and its material provisions.

3.3.1. The Most Important Results for the LV Respondents' Group

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 (*p* = 0.000) have been found depending on the size of the workload for working with children with SEN. The respondents who have not indicated the amount of their working hours agreed the most (mean 3.67). The lowest average value is for respondents who work more than 80 h per month (mean 1.19).

In the evaluation of the statement "Students with mild to moderate developmental disabilities should be taught in regular classes with nondisabled students because they will

not require too much of the teacher's time", the differences that are statistically significant depend on:

- the process of the professional qualification acquisition for work with children with SEN ($p = 0.005$). The average value of assessments for those who have obtained education only in practical experience (mean 3.23) and those who have not revealed the kind of education they have obtained (mean 3.80) are, in turn, lower for those who have obtained higher education in the field (mean 2.27);
- the workload for working with children with special needs ($p = 0.002$). The respondents who have not indicated the size of workload (mean 3.83) and who currently do not work with children with special needs (mean 3.28) are the most supportive of the statement. The average value, characterised as the lowest, is for those respondents who work more than 80 h per month (mean 2.31).

In the evaluation of the statement "Students with mild to moderate disabilities can be more effectively educated in regular classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms", the differences that are statistically significant depend on:

- the process of obtaining the professional qualification for work with children with SEN ($p = 0.001$). The average value of the assessments is observed for those who have obtained their education in the field only in practical experience (mean 3.96), whereas, the lowest value is for those who have obtained higher education (mean 2.76);
- the workload for working with children with SEN ($p = 0.000$). The respondents most supportive (mean 5.00) of the statement are the teachers who have not revealed their workload and those who currently do not work with children with SEN (mean 3.79). The average value, characterised as the lowest, is for the respondents who work more than 80 h per month (mean 2.79).

3.3.2. The Most Important Results for the LT Respondents' Group

In the evaluation of the statement "Most of all special classrooms for children with mild or moderately severe developmental disabilities should be closed", the differences that are statistically significant depend on:

- the qualifications of the respondents ($p = 0.006$). 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 ($p = 0.043$). A high average value is for respondents who have not indicated their level of education (mean 6.00), followed by respondents with a bachelor's degree (mean 3.91), while a lower rating is for the respondents who have indicated another option (mean 2.45);
- the workload for working with children with SEN ($p = 0.025$). Respondents who work 2–10 h a month (mean 4.54) and 80 and more hours a month (mean 4.17) are the most supportive of the statement, but those who do not currently work with children with SEN are the ones who are in denial (mean 3.04);
- material provisions of the school ($p = 0.017$). The respondents who work in schools with sufficient provisions agree more often (mean 4.13), but the teachers whose schools have insufficient provisions are more negative (mean 3.06).

In the evaluation of 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", the differences that are statistically significant depend on:

- experience ($p = 0.000$). The greatest support for the statement is in the group of respondents' who work from 10 to 14 years in the field (mean 5.29), but a negative attitude is expressed by the respondents with 20 and more years of experience (mean 3.19);
- the status of the school ($p = 0.030$). Respondents working in primary schools have a more positive attitude (mean 4.40), but those working in secondary schools express a more negative attitude (mean 2.00);

- material provisions of the school (*p* = 0.006). Respondents agree more often in schools whose resources are maximally provided and allow for the flexible improvement of the educational process (mean 4.80), but the teachers whose schools are insufficiently provided for are more negative (mean 3.12).

In the evaluation of the statement "Students with mild to moderate disabilities can be more effectively educated in regular classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms", the differences that are statistically significant depend on the location of the workplace (*p* = 0.034). The 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).

4. Discussion

The principles of IE have been integrated into the legislation of many EU countries, which are at the base of the reforms in education systems. The results of scientific research confirm the importance of the compliance of educational institutions with specific individuals' needs. In this aspect, the education process is organised in a way that every child receives appropriate and timely support for learning (Hasan et al. 2018; Haug 2017; Maykus et al. 2014; Saloviita 2020; Thomas 2013).

Another aspect is the link between national traditions, values, ideologies, and experiences regarding inclusion. There cannot be one model of IE that is right for every country. Empirical evidence suggests that both importers and exporters of inclusive philosophies need to respect local values in order to succeed. Therefore, each country must develop its own model of IE, as it is not easy to implement a progressive inclusive policy when it encounters established and ingrained national traditions (Mitchell 2014).

In this context, it is essential to create an understanding of IE based on the values of each nation. Of course, it is necessary to get to know the experiences of other countries and educational institutions, both for the implementation of IE and for learning pedagogical strategies; however, if they are adopted directly from the educational systems of more experienced countries, there is a possibility that they will not achieve the desired goal and could even worsen the existing situation.

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

Taking into account the influencing factors of inclusive pedagogical practices, teachers' attitudes toward IE are an important area of research, where negative attitudes constitute the most considerable barriers to the success of inclusion (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; Mittler 2000; Sharma et al. 2021). The success of IE is in the mutual interaction with the transformation processes of educational institutions and education system changes, while its quality depends on competent teachers who are willing to improve their professional skills and have positive attitude towards IE (Engelbrecht 2013; Sharma et al. 2008; Sharma and Nuttal 2016). Educators and support staff involved in the educational process need a set of skills to provide support to all learners who need it.

The conducted research involves respondents from two countries with diverse professional experiences. The data confirm that intercorrelations between subscales are closer for LT than for LV respondents (see Table 1). Disharmony in the interaction of the attitudinal components can be found in the LV group regarding the components of attitude that affect teachers' involvement in IE. Accordingly, the dominance of affective and behavioural, rather than cognitive, components are observed (see Table 2).

This research design does not show the clarification of the causes of the mentioned differences, which can raise questions about both IE provision and quality, for example, in how the educational institution as an organization and its staff treats students with SEN and to what extent it is influenced by school culture. (Florian 2015; Wilson et al. 2018). Therefore, it may be assumed that education system reforms focused on IE are more successful in one country than in the other.

The results of the study show that the attitudes of teachers are influenced by the environment and individual characteristics, and the effectiveness of the learning process depends on the context. For example, a teacher who is an expert in his subject for a certain age group of students may not feel as confident when the circumstances are different. (Desombre et al. 2021; Saloviita 2020; Sharma et al. 2021).

The above-mentioned findings indicate that the attitudes of teachers, regarding the implementation of IE, is influenced by various factors, including the acquired education, professional qualification for working with children with SEN, workload, and experience in the environment of IE. Among the most important factors are also the location of the workplace and the provisions of the infrastructure (see Table 3).

The analysis of the research data points to the fact that there are differences in the attitude of LV and LT teachers. IE-LT teachers with more professional experience have a more positive attitude than LV teachers in the implementation of IE. A dominant negative attitude has been observed in the group of LV respondents who work more than 80 h per month. The findings reveal similar factors, as in other scientific studies, that influence teachers' attitudes towards the concept and practice of IE, such as the availability of resources, the quality of support, awareness of one's professional competence, and the behaviour of students with SEN in the classroom environment (Ewing et al. 2017; Forlin et al. 2008; Monsen et al. 2014).

The attitude of teachers towards IE and the principle of its implementation is one of the main challenges because there is an opinion that it is more difficult to work with students with SEN than with others in the classroom environment. This is influenced by several factors, the most important of which are the degree and nature of SEN, teachers' experience working with children with SEN, and the competence to implement IE in integrated classrooms (Chhabra et al. 2010; Unianu 2012).

The research data show that a more positive attitude can be observed in the group of respondents whose experience in working with children with SEN was gained only in practical work, rather than having acquired a professional qualification in an educational institution. An interesting relationship is revealed among respondents who are ready to take responsibility and act but do not really believe in positive results. Negative attitudes can also be observed for those teachers whose workload and amount of experience in IE is higher. These aspects require further research focussing on a long-term transformation process from special to IE.

5. Conclusions

The results of the empirical study confirm that, despite the similarity in the implementation processes of inclusive education, the situations in the two countries involved are different. In the conducted research, the type of professional qualification obtained for working with children with SEN, the workload, and the professional experience in SEN dominate among the factors affecting teachers' attitudes. The factors related to the location of the workplace and the available resources, as well as their provisions, were also found to be important. However, disharmony can be observed in the interaction of these components, which confirms the current situation in the IE system—as teachers' professional experience and involvement in IE increases, the confidence in a successful end result decreases, unfortunately.

Social factors may determine attitudinal developments, such as insufficient financial resources for the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, it would be important to support national studies in LV and LT, regarding countries with similar IE implementation experiences, to strengthen mutual communication with other countries with a similar history, taking into account the history of the development of inclusive education in that country.

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