

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities: Comparative Perspectives of Special and Regular Teachers in Georgia

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HOW TO CITE:

Chanturia, R. (2023).
Inclusion of Students with Disabilities:
Comparative Perspectives
of Special and Regular Teachers
in Georgia.
*International Journal
of Special Education*, 38(2), 124-137.

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.52291/ijse.2023.38.28>

ABSTRACT:

Within a global debate around inclusion, there is a shared understanding that teachers' attitudes are decisive in making inclusive education a reality. Research examining teachers' attitudes in Georgia towards inclusion is scarce. This paper utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to examine teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, uncovering their predictors and highlighting the persistent influence of the Soviet legacy of 'defectology' on disability perceptions. Drawing on data obtained from 811 regular and special education teachers of 308 public schools, the study contributes to the global knowledge of the role of teachers' attitudes in promoting inclusion. The study reveals that teachers of Georgia are mostly 'ableist' and have deficit views of disability. The paper argues that only long-term training in inclusive practices predicts positive attitudes for both groups of teachers. Special education teachers demonstrate higher willingness for inclusion. Regular teachers spotlight normalcy, reveal low expectations for academic achievement, and focus on behaviour management rather than broader teaching practices. Both groups associate inclusion benefits primarily with social and emotional development. Resistance to inclusion is more prevailing among secondary grades, STEM, Georgian, and English teachers. The findings have policy implications for enhancing education quality for children with disabilities and teachers' professional development system in Georgia.

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Keywords: inclusive education, comparative perspectives, teachers' attitudes, Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, inclusive education has garnered substantial attention in both domestic and international policy discourse. While the interpretation of ‘inclusion’ may assume contextual nuances, the adoption of the Education for All (EFA) initiative in 1990 concretized the global consensus that equal access to education should transcend barriers (Ainscow, 2020). The Salamanca Statement (1994), and the Dakar Framework of Action (UNESCO, 2000) propelled the agenda of inclusive education, particularly for learners with special educational needs, a commitment reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1999), and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Against this backdrop, countries acknowledging education as an inherent human right (UN General Assembly, 1948) are reconfiguring their educational paradigms to engender inclusivity. Despite this commitment, the provision of quality education for children with disabilities, including the Georgian context, confronts multifaceted challenges. Despite the advocacy for inclusive pedagogical strategies, learners with disabilities often find themselves marginalized within mainstream classrooms (Mushoriwa, 2001). Often, attempts to implement inclusive policies prioritize student instruction location over instruction quality (Dewald-Kaufmann et al., 2021) and “teaching for real” remains a challenge (Naraian, 2019). After 30 years of the collapse of the Soviet Union, ‘ableist’ discourses and narratives regarding people with disabilities (PWDs) persist in Georgia; disability-attached stigma is perpetuated and labelling entrenched, becoming root-causes for prejudice and isolation.

Within the global debate around inclusion, there is a common view that teachers’ attitudes are decisive in making inclusive education a reality. As Ainscow notes (2005), “the starting point for the development of [inclusive] practice within a school has to be the close scrutiny of how existing practices may be acting as barriers to learning.” (p. 9). In this respect, it is important to listen carefully those involved, primarily teachers. For the successful application of inclusive practices, it is decisive to uncover teachers’ attitudes as primary actors for shaping implementation of the policies (Charitaki et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2020; Saloviita, 2020). Research also underscores the profound impact of educators’ attitudes on classroom dynamics, exerting discernible effects on accommodations and pedagogical adjust-

ments (Sharma & Jacobs, 2016; Damianidou & Phitiaka, 2018) and exhibiting a symbiotic relationship with instructional efficacy (Jovanova et al., 2020). In light of this, the exploration of educators’ attitudes assumes paramount significance for the comprehensive endeavor of inclusive education (de Boer et al., 2011; Dias & Cadime, 2016; Vogiatzi et al., 2021).

Georgia’s educational landscape grapples with a discernible dearth of research delving into educators’ attitudes towards inclusive education. The present study endeavors to bridge this gap by delving into the attitudes and resistance exhibited by Georgian educators towards the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) within regular classroom settings. Employing a sequential mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), and anchoring around the established theories of attitude formation (Ajzen, 1991; Allport, 1967; Bandura, 1977; van Aalderen-Smeets et al., 2012; Zajonc, 1968), the study strives to illuminate educators’ pivotal roles in the realm of inclusive education and their nuanced attitudes and dispositions vis-à-vis the inclusion of SEN students.

The study has specific sub-questions:

- What are the teachers’ views and attitudes toward inclusive education?
- How do Georgian teachers define and understand inclusion and disability?
- Is there a difference between the attitudes of regular and special education teachers?
- What are the variables associated with teachers’ attitudes and perspectives toward inclusion of students with SEN in a regular classroom?

Two hypotheses constitute the foundation of the study: (1) Attitudes toward inclusive education will significantly vary contingent on the typology and severity of students’ disabilities; (2) Attitudinal differentials will manifest based on educators’ knowledge, direct interactions, or pedagogical exposure to learners with disabilities.

While acknowledging the encompassing expanse of inclusive education, which encompasses all learners beyond disabilities (Ainscow, 2020), this study’s focus is predominantly confined to students with disabilities in the Georgian context. Nonetheless, the study aligns with the holistic ethos of inclusion, encompassing real engagement of not some but all learners (Leijen, 2021; Naraian, 2019) in the environment where all the barriers are removed to meet the individual needs (Baglieri & Lalvani, 2019; Kozleski, 2020).

Setting the Context: a trajectory of inclusive education development in Georgia

The Soviet Legacy

It has not been a long time ago, when institutionalized care was the only option for education of children with disabilities. During the Soviet time, the education system was highly segregated for PWDs; most children with SEN stayed at home or isolated in special institutions. The notion of the Soviet theories of disability implied that 'defect' was a unifying element that put together different categories of PWDs. Whereas the civilized world eluded the word 'defect', in the Soviet countries the field of 'Defectology'¹ was thriving. People believed that disability was a tragic condition and 'better to be dead' attitude was a understanding about disability. Segregation was considered to be 'a necessary measure' for the provision of support to PWDs; PWDs resided in an isolated world that was perpetuated by ableist attitudes (Stepaniuk, 2019). These ingrained historical experience and deficit-focused view of disability are reflected in the views of the Georgian society.

The Way forward: from Defectology toward Inclusion

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian education system ushered into significant transformation. Initial reforms (1996-2003), supported by the World

Bank and Open Society, laid the foundation for changes (Janashia, 2018). Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, a comprehensive restructuring of the education system was initiated. A pivotal legislative framework, *the Law of Georgia on General Education*, was enacted in 2005, forming the basis for governance restructuring, curriculum development, per capita funding model, and increased school autonomy (Janashia, 2018).

From 2005 onward, inclusive education became a focal point of reforms. Initiatives encompassed the Child Welfare Reform, involving the closure of residential institutions and transition to family-based care. In parallel, the Government embarked on 'policy borrowing' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006) from Norway and introduced inclusive schooling in ten schools. EFA principles were echoed in the 2009 Inclusive Education Support Program, leading to legislative changes and individualized education plans (Chanturia et al., 2016). Ratification of the UN CRPD in 2016 amplified inclusive education efforts. The creation of integrative classes for students with autistic spectrum disorder and hearing impairment and the integration of special education teachers at schools in 2018 marked pivotal steps. Due to these, the situation improved in terms of access to education for students with SEN - if, in 2009, the number of SEN students equalled to 160, in 2021, the number reached to 11,282.

FROM DEFECTOLOGY TO INCLUSION

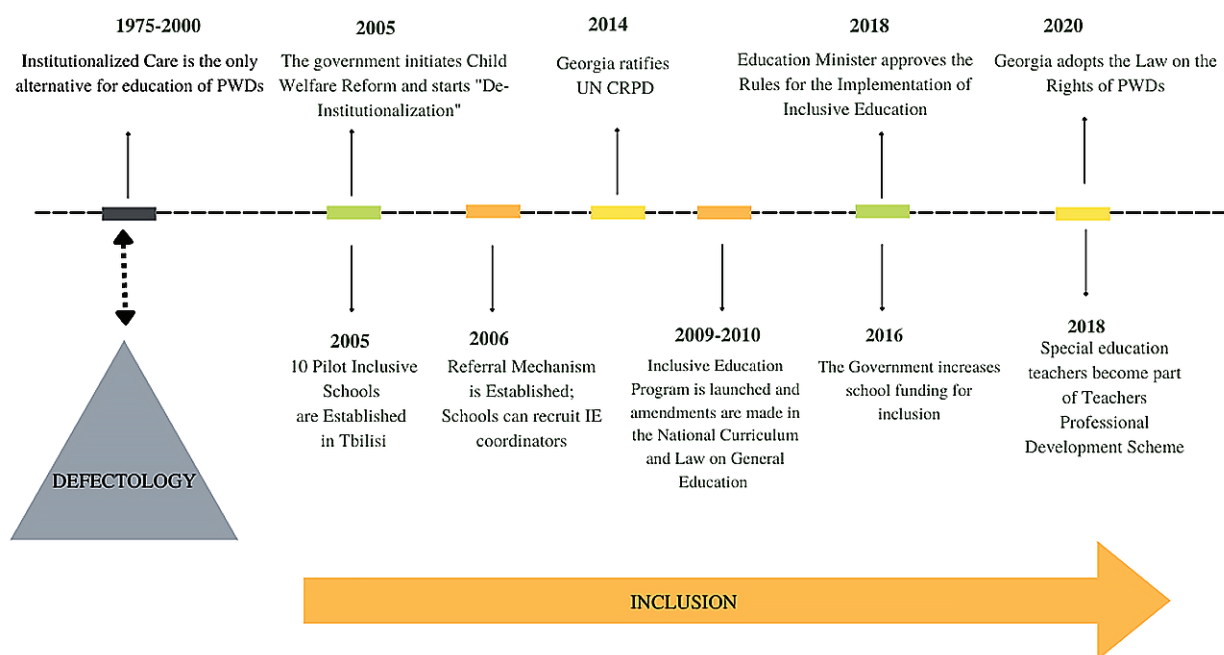


Fig. 1. Timeline (developed by the author) of the major policy, legislative and institutional changes in inclusive education.

While improvements are vivid, an acceptance and 'teaching for real' (Naraian, 2019) remain to be challenges. There are several reasons behind, including teachers' limited competencies in inclusive practices, scarcity of resources, and insufficient teachers' professional development. Funding for inclusive education is fragmented, hindering transformation of schools into inclusive institutions. The main challenge is also poor monitoring system of inclusive education (Chanturia et al., 2016). These challenges are coupled with teachers' negative or ambivalent attitudes towards inclusion. Being deemed 'incapable' is a common expectation of teachers toward children with disabilities. Today, it is obvious that the main necessity in Georgia is to make a positive attitudinal shift. In the beginning, this shift must be made among teachers as major actors for the implementation of inclusive education.

Ascertaining the Factors Influencing Teachers Attitudes

As a review of global literature demonstrates, teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education can be determined by various variables related to national or cultural context, a school, a teacher, or a student. Frequently investigated variables include: a teacher's gender (Chhabra et al., 2010) and age (Boyle et al., 2013; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017). The results of studies are not congruent. Some studies suggest that female teachers have more positive attitudes towards inclusion than their male colleagues (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004) and there could be differences depending on the teacher's age (Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017). However, there are studies which report no differences between gender, age and attitudes (Chhabra et al., 2010).

Some studies explore whether a teacher's prior education have any influence on their attitudes. The conclusions are controversial. According to few studies, teachers' previous education has a significant impact on their attitudes toward students with disabilities (Dimitrios et al., 2018), while other studies suggest that teachers' previous education did not affect attitudes. For example, a study conducted in Nigeria by Lazarus (2020) concluded that teacher qualifications and previous education did not affect attitudes. Additional study in Spain seconded this finding and concluded that the level of education does not affect teachers' attitudes toward children with disabilities (Gallego-Ortega, 2021).

Literature suggests that access to resources could also be a contributing factor while forming teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, including for mitigating stress and overcoming barriers related to inclusive classroom

(Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Campbell et al., 2014; Galaterou & Antoniou, 2017). However, there is a study from Finland which concludes that material resources are not essential - the most important for a teacher is access to non-material resources, including the support of the school principal and collaboration with colleagues. (Saloviita, 2020) Across ongoing global debate, one of the issues under scrutiny is the professional development of teachers in inclusive education and its impact on their attitudes. The results of most of the studies reviewed are consistent the more competent a teacher is in inclusive teaching strategies, the less stress he has, the easier s/he can manage the class, have a sense of self-efficacy, can assess the student with disabilities (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019; Junaidi, 2020).

In the current discourse on inclusive education, one of the narratives is that teachers' attitudes vary depending on the type and severity of disability of a student. If we look at the existing literature, most works conducted in different countries support the afore-mentioned postulate. For instance, Alghazo & Naggar Gaad (2004) conducted research in the United Arab Emirates about regular teachers' attitudes and perceptions and contended that most teachers exposed negative attitudes toward the idea of inclusive education. Their concerns were much more explicit regarding the inclusion of students with emotional and behavioral problems. In 2010, a study was conducted in Turkey which aimed to investigate the opinions of general education teachers about inclusion of students with disabilities in Turkish public [primary] schools. While general attitudes towards inclusion were positive, teachers were not willing to include students with severe disabilities in the regular classroom (Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010). A similar finding was found in a 2014 study in Ghana (Alhassan, 2014), where the results showed that teachers' attitudes varied significantly depending on the type and severity of students' disabilities, and their negative attitudes were associated with the presence of an SEN student in the classroom. The findings of a recent study in Macedonia (Jovanova et al., 2020) also in line with the above-mentioned evidence. Although according to the author, primary school teachers had positive attitudes toward inclusive education, the research confirmed that these attitudes varied significantly depending on the type and degree of the student's disability. As the author further noted, teachers had the least acceptance of children with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, and behavioral disorders. The recent study from France suggests that teachers are particularly unwilling to engage students with autism

spectrum disorder compared with other disabilities (Jury et al., 2021).

Lastly, ample amount of literature suggests that the teachers' prior contact/exposure to PWDs, including experience in teaching could be an important predictor to shaping attitudes. Loreman and Earle (2007) carried out research on the development of attitudes, sentiments, and concerns about inclusive education in Canada. The study indicated that prior experience in teaching children with disabilities has affected teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusive education. A study in Greece (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007) also reported that teachers who were actively involved in teaching students with had more positive attitudes towards inclusive education than their counterparts who had little or no experience. A study conducted in India (Parasuram, 2006) also reiterates the same conclusion - according to a researcher, the only variable that influenced teachers' attitudes towards inclusion was a previous experience of interaction/contact with a person with disabilities. A more recent 2021 study in France (Jury et al. 2021) corroborates the afore-mentioned conclusions and notes that special education teachers have more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities than general/subject area teachers. This, in turn, is explained by the fact that special education teachers have greater exposure to SEN children than general education teachers.

Conceptual Framework

Attitude is not a simple and single, but multidimensional construct, which encompasses three pillars - cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Eagly & Chaik-

en, 1993). While, within the study, prior contact with PWDs and knowledge of inclusive practices are framed as predictors of attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities, the willingness to apply inclusive practices in the classroom is interpreted as a behavioral element.

The conceptual framework guiding this research draws from foundational theories like Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), Zajonc's Theory of Mere Exposure (1968) and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1991). Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1977) and a non-traditional framework by van Aalderen-Smeets et al. (2012) are also incorporated. This framework posits that teachers' attitudes depend on contact/exposure, teaching experience with disabled children, and their depth of inclusive practice knowledge. It suggests that prior experiences impact all attitude dimensions. The Framework also incorporates 'Cultural understanding of Disability' (examining disability through the lenses of normalcy or with an understanding that it is a social construct and a result of prejudice) as an important predictor affecting two paradigms of the attitude: affective states (teachers' moods, emotions and feelings) and perceived behavioral control, i.e., how teachers believe in their ability to manage inclusive classroom, and actually perform the behavior. Plus, the proposed framework incorporates child-related variable – type and severity of disability as a predictor. Herewith, the framework acknowledges the intricate nature of attitude-behavior relationships without claiming to encompass all complexities. It aids in understanding attitude formation and identifying variables impacting attitudes towards inclusion.

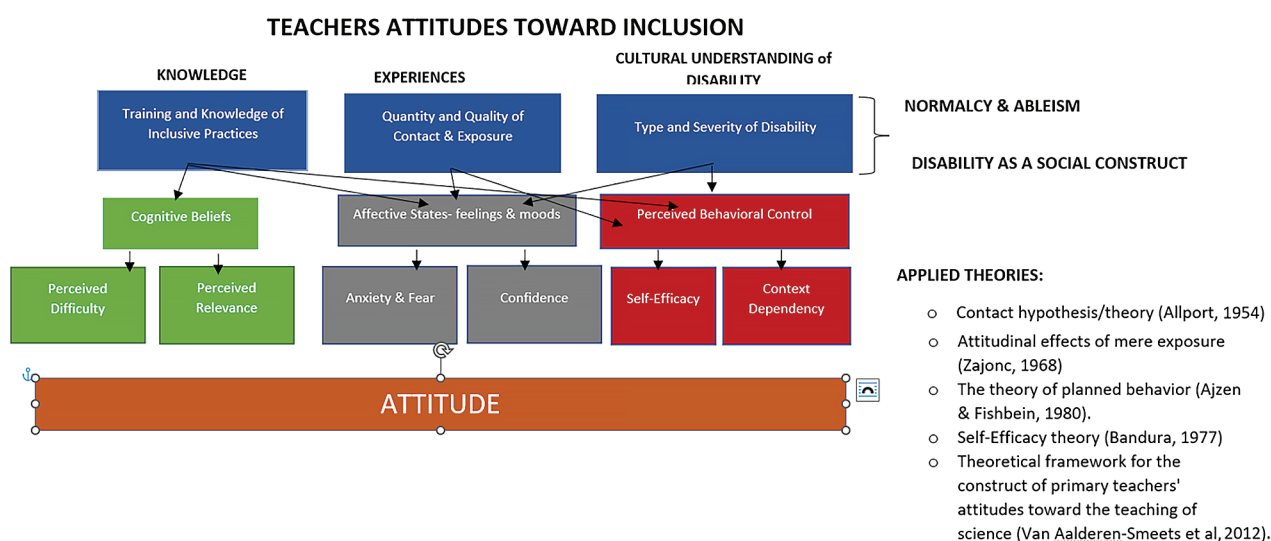


Fig. 2. Interpretive framework of the study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sampling

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods to investigate teachers' attitudes and the underlying variables influencing their perspectives about inclusion. It facilitated a nuanced understanding of attitudes, amalgamating diverse perspectives, data, and analyses for insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Following Collins's typology (2006), the incorporation of quantitative and qualitative methods served three purposes: [1] simultaneous triangulation to verify and corroborate findings across data; [2] data complementarity for elaboration and explanation of attitudes; [3] broader inquiry through data richness. Neither approach held dominance, with both carrying roughly equal weight.

The study employed quantitative and qualitative strands conducted sequentially using the same participants. Multi-stage cluster sampling was employed for the quantitative phase to achieve a representative sample, encompassing 308 schools selected based on number of students, location and concentration of SEN students. In the initial stage, schools were divided into clusters based on the presence or absence of special education needs students, with equal representation. Clusters were stratified by geographic (urban and rural) criteria to address educational inequity concerns in Georgia (Chankseliani, 2013). Further stratification occurred by student population size (small, medium, large schools). Simple random sampling was used to select schools within each cluster. All teachers within the selected schools were invited to participate in the survey via email, yielding 811 fully completed surveys from up to 10,567 teachers in 308 schools. The quantitative phase was linked to the qualitative phase by inviting willing participants from the survey sample to engage in interviews. 20 teachers (general and special education), from diverse geographic areas and educational backgrounds, were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. Consent was sought through email, with six special education teachers and 14 general education teachers participating in the interviews.

Research Instruments

The quantitative research survey utilized in this study is an adapted version of the Teachers Attitude to Inclusion Scale (TAIS), initially developed by Monsen and co-authors in 2015, itself derived from the 'Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming Scale' (ORMS) by Larrivee and Cook (1979). The survey was translated into Georgian and contextualized to the country's setting. Official consent from the TAIS authors was obtained in 2021. After

adaptation, the questionnaire underwent review by three Georgian education experts and pilot with 30 teachers.

The Georgian TAIS comprises four sections: (1) demographics of teachers and schools, (2) 'willingness to include' to gauge openness to children with diverse disabilities, (3) 'adequacy of support,' modified significantly to reflect support mechanisms, and (4) the fourth section measuring teacher attitudes to the concept of inclusion.

The in-depth interview protocol, serving as a bridge between quantitative and qualitative aspects, focused on the fourth section of the TAIS. This section, aligned with four themes/factors, covered problems, social benefits, teaching practice implications, and addressing needs of children with SEN. This integration of data sources facilitated a holistic approach to understanding attitudes towards inclusion (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place from May to August 2022. After schools' selection, an official letter was sent to the MoES, requesting them to distribute an online survey link to teachers in the chosen schools. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on research involving human subjects (Kobakhidze et al., 2021), access to research sites and participants was constrained. Consequently, an alternative method was devised for the interviews. Given the infeasibility of in-person interviews, interviews were conducted via the 'Zoom' platform. These virtual interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes, leveraging both audio and video functions. 'Zoom' facilitated connection with interviewees and allowed for seamless engagement despite physical limitations. The clear benefit of the Zoom platform also included its recording capabilities.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 26). Descriptive and frequency data were computed, along with Cronbach's Alpha to assess reliability for each factor. A T-Test compared teacher attitudes among different groups. One-way ANOVA, post hoc analysis, and multiple linear regression explored variables and predictors. Qualitative analysis employed constant comparison and classical content analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Georgian and translated into English. NVIVO software facilitated data organization, enabling identification of recurring themes. Triangulation enhanced analysis fidelity, with the final research study amalgamating qualitative and quantitative findings.

Limitations of the Study and Ethical Considerations

Due to personal data protection regulations (2016), teachers' emails or phone numbers were unavailable.

The MoES assisted in disseminating the questionnaire. To address this, participants were reassured that only the researcher had access to the survey results.

The research adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Approval from Ilia State University's IRB was secured in May 2022, incorporating the final survey version. Given the absence of on-site administration, traditional signed consent forms weren't feasible. Instead, participants granted consent online. The questionnaire's introduction reiterated the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature. It also emphasized that solely the researcher would access survey outcomes. For the qualitative component, participants were informed about the study's intent, voluntary participation, and the option to withdraw during interviews. I addressed queries from participants and assured that their identities would remain anonymous.

RESULTS

Teachers Attitudes toward Inclusion – Findings of the Quantitative Data

To explore teachers attitudes toward inclusion, two measurements were used for the quantitative strand of the study: (1) endorsement of a teacher to include SEN student in a regular classroom operationalized in the study as 'willingness to include,' and (2) 'attitude score' to determine teachers' attitudes and the variables influencing their perspectives.

Willingness to include students with SEN in a regular classroom

On 8-point ascending scale, teachers evaluated willingness to include children with varying disabilities and severity. Analysis indicated that teachers hold neutral sentiments toward inclusion, but display scepticism when it comes to practical implementation. Attitudes are influenced by the medical condition of a student. The mean score on 8-point scale for 'How willing are you to include a child with the following difficulties?' is 3.45, below the midpoint.

The first hypothesis was supported by the analysis, revealing that both - type and severity of disability impact attitudes. Particularly, teachers express less favorable attitudes toward students with multiple disabilities ($\text{mean}_1=3.2$) and behavioral disorders ($\text{mean}_2=3.3$), while their attitudes toward students with cognitive and physical limitations are more positive.

A distinction exists between special education and general education teachers in terms of 'willingness to include.' Special education teachers demonstrate higher average index on the 8-point scale ($\text{mean}_{\text{spec}}=4.8$) compared to general teachers ($\text{mean}_{\text{gen}}=3.3$) (fig.3).

The study hypothesized that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion could be influenced by knowledge of inclusive practices and prior experience with PWDs. To explore this, associations between training, prior contact, and willingness to include were examined. A significant difference was found in the 'willingness to include' scores

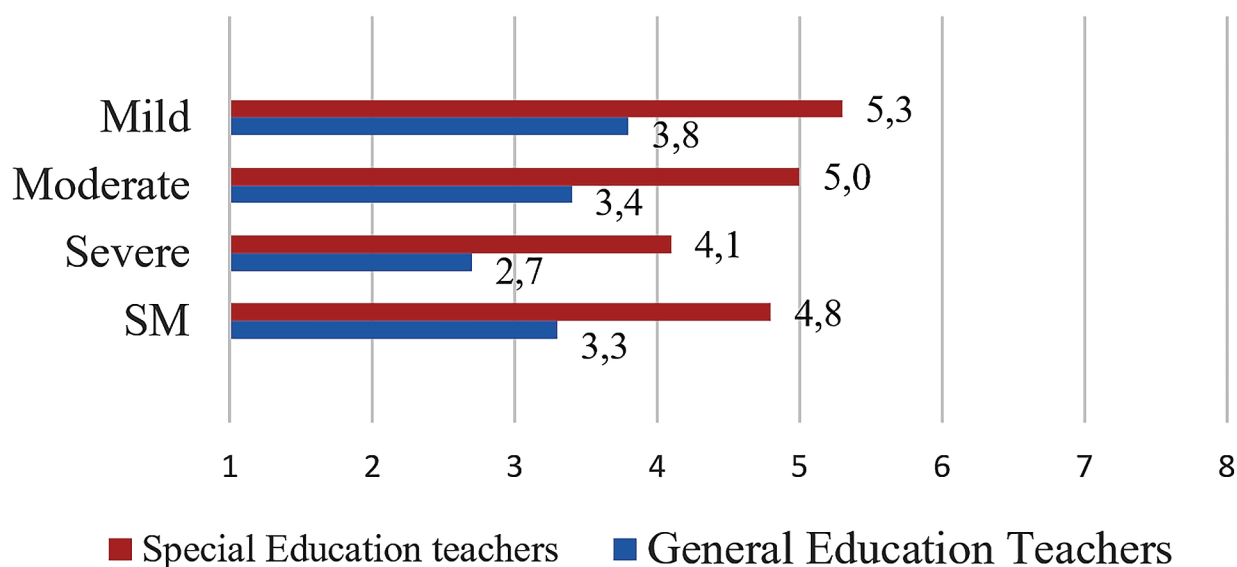


Fig. 3. Teachers' willingness to include children with disabilities in a regular classroom.

between teachers with occasional or frequent contact with persons with SEN (mean=3.592, SD=2.351) and those without such contact (mean=2.516, SD=1.927) ($P_{\text{value}} < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.69$).

Training in inclusive practices emerged as a predictor for both groups of teachers. Those who received training had higher 'willingness to include' scores (trained: $m = 3.72$, $SD = 2.44$; untrained: $m = 2.90$, $SD = 2.11$). Further differentiation revealed a substantial difference between long-term/formally educated (mean=4.67, $SD = 2.582$) and short-term trained (mean=3.367, $SD = 2.295$) teachers, as well as between those with no training (mean=2.89, $SD = 2.891$) and long-term/formally educated teachers ($P_{\text{value}} < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 0.75$). Teachers with training reported higher self-efficacy (mean=5.0) compared to those without (mean=4.2). Long-term/formal education contributed to 8.8% of variability in self-efficacy. Institutional support was another influencing factor. Regression analysis indicated that higher support correlated with higher self-efficacy. For teachers with SEN students, school-level support explained 25.9% of the variability in self-efficacy.

Attitudes towards inclusion

Teachers Attitude to Inclusion Scale (TAIS) encompasses four dimensions represented by 21 statements: (1) problems of inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream classes; (2) social benefits of inclusion in mainstream classes; (3) implications of inclusion for teaching practice; and (4) implications for teachers addressing the needs of children with SEN. Due to varying item counts, mean scores were computed for each factor. The reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's coefficients of .852, .64, .59, and .77 for Components 1 to 4 respectively.

Attitude Score (4 factors combined) was found to be a predictor for 'willingness to include.' According to multiple linear regression, among 4 factors, 'social benefits for all of inclusion' and 'implications of inclusion for teaching practice' resulted in the highest factor loading. A significant regression was established with an $R = 349$ $r^2 = 0.122$.

Regression analyses supported the hypothesis that attitudes are influenced by the type and severity of students' disabilities. Teachers displayed greater openness to children with mild or moderate disabilities, while resisting those with severe disabilities. Attitudinal variations were evident between special education and subject area teachers. Special education teachers exhibited more positive attitudes compared to their subject area counterparts. In terms of the four factors, significant dif-

ferences were observed. In F1 (problems of inclusion), special teachers (mean=6.969, $SD = 1.259$) differed from general teachers (mean=5.801, $SD = 1.747$). In F2 (social benefits), special teachers (mean=7.452, $SD = 1.074$) differed from general teachers (mean=6.306, $SD = 1.534$). In F3 (implications for teaching), there was no significant difference ($P = 0.067$). In F4 (implications for addressing SEN), special teachers (mean=5.160, $SD = 1.528$) differed from general teachers (mean=3.725, $SD = 1.624$).

Qualitative part

The qualitative findings corroborated the quantitative results, demonstrating that teachers in Georgia predominantly hold 'ableist' perspectives and view inclusion through the lens of a student's medical diagnosis. Special education teachers expressed higher levels of willingness for inclusion, consistent with the quantitative outcomes. They often advocated for inclusive education as a human right and a means to foster full participation of individuals with disabilities in society. While acknowledging the challenges, special education teachers emphasized the importance of equality and the potential benefits of co-learning.

Both groups of teachers highlighted the significance of the way inclusion is executed. They agreed that successful inclusion requires appropriate conditions, support mechanisms, and well-trained teachers. The consensus was that inclusive education could yield positive academic outcomes only when educators adequately prepared lessons and adapted resources. However, if executed poorly, separate classes might be preferable. While special education teachers leaned towards positive attitude regarding inclusion, some believed that the decision should consider the child's medical condition. A special education teacher noted, *'It depends on the condition of the child. If the child's condition allows it, full inclusion is better.'*

In contrast, general education teachers displayed resistance to inclusion, suggesting that placing severely disabled students in a separate environment might be more suitable.

General education teachers often exhibited a normative and ableist mindset, categorizing children as either 'capable' or 'incapable' of learning. *'I have one SEN child who is very aggressive. It is impossible to manage his behaviour. He is too disabled to be included,'* noted Civics Teacher. The understanding of "too disabled to include" perpetuated the narratives of general education teachers. This perspective became even more evident during discussions about the academic advancement of SEN students. When asked about where SEN children would

develop academic skills more rapidly, teachers frequently preface their responses with '*It depends...*' based on the child's diagnosis, and severity of disability. *'It depends on what stage of disability we are dealing and what kind of health condition child has;*' It depends on the child's physical, emotional, and mental abilities. If a child has mental disability, it is a waste of time to include him in the regular class,' noted primary education teacher.

Teachers generally expressed no objections to including students with mild disabilities, such as physical impairments. However, their stance differs when contemplating the inclusion of students with ADHD, ASD, or behavioral difficulties. These scenarios evoke fear and anxiety among teachers, who struggle to manage disruptive behavior and find it challenging to sustain a conducive learning environment. The fears and anxiety related to inclusion is obvious from the narratives of teachers: *'After a lesson, the teacher herself needs to get some counselling, because psychologically, there is a great pressure and anxiety. If you don't know how to help, you get stressed'* (Math Teacher); *'There are situations when a child has tantrum, becomes aggressive and dangerous. The first time I encountered this, I was shocked, didn't know what to do.'* (Biology Teacher).

For academic purposes, most teachers believe that a self-contained class offers more effective instruction for students with SEN. They contend that what special educators accomplish in a month of intensive teaching and therapy might take a year in a regular classroom. Both general and special education teachers stress that the implementation of inclusive education is crucial. If inclusion lacks prioritization in school development, parental involvement, and professional training, a specialized class may yield better learning outcomes.

Teachers from both groups perceive several advantages of placing SEN students in regular classrooms, one of which is peer learning. According to a special education teacher, regular classrooms facilitate peer-assisted learning, allowing SEN students to absorb information through their peers' answers and participation in group activities. *'In the regular class, SEN student can hear the answers from the peers, and engage in group activities. He may not be able to read himself, but he can learn just by listening,'* said a special education teacher. Inclusion also fosters a competitive environment, and promotes role modeling.

Qualitative analysis exposes significant alignment between the attitudes and perceptions of both teacher groups concerning the social benefits of inclusion. Like quantitative data, qualitative findings indicate that both groups attribute the benefits of inclusion mainly to the

social and emotional development of all students, including those without special needs. Teachers observe progress in terms of social skills development, often expressing surprise at success made by SEN students. This astonishment might stem from low expectations regarding the academic achievements of SEN students and a limited view of teaching focused on behavior management, rather than a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' Attitudes and Understanding of Inclusion

From the quantitative findings, teachers overall attitude score was negative, while according to the qualitative data, teachers had ambivalent attitude to the idea of inclusion on a conceptual level. At the same time, teachers' attitudes were mostly shaped by deficit-centred understanding of disability and influenced by challenges related to inclusive classrooms - lack of knowledge and experience in inclusive practices and inadequate institutional support.

Overall, majority of general education teachers think in terms of normalcy and ableism and sort children as 'capable' or 'incapable' to learn. This was particularly obvious during the conversation about the development of academic skills among SEN students. During the conversation about their 'willingness to include,' most of general teachers' narratives were saturated with the references about the level of severity and type of disability.

For most of general education teachers, inclusion is associated with chaos, uncertainty, and disruption of the class, especially when they are referring to a child with severe or multiple disabilities or behavioural disorders. While reflecting about expected behaviour from SEN students, teachers talk about their fears and anxiety. Both quantitative and qualitative data made abundantly clear that teachers position SEN students from the lens of 'lacking something' instead of building classrooms where everyone is perceived as capable. Teachers also make indication that inclusion is more responsibility of special education teachers.

Differences in the Attitudes of the Special and General Education Teachers

From the analysis of the data, it is evident that there is a substantial difference between the views of special and general education teachers. Quantitative data revealed that the difference between the means of two groups of teachers is statistically significant in terms of 'willingness

to include.’ Qualitative data also corroborated this finding and showed that special educators are more supportive to the idea of inclusion, have more favourable attitudes and examine inclusion from the human rights perspective, while making emphasis that education should be accessible for all, and special measures should be applied only when there is an extreme necessity for that. This could be explained by the hypothesis of the study: special education teachers have more frequent interaction and exposure to students with SEN as well as deeper understanding and more specific knowledge in inclusive practices.

Despite these differences, inclusion of SEN students with behavioural difficulties and multiple disabilities seems to be extremely problematic for majority of teachers. The analysis indicates that students’ type and severity of disability influences the attitudes – both group of teachers have negative attitudes towards students with multiple disabilities and behavioral disorders, while the attitude towards students with physical limitations is relatively positive.

General education teachers seem to have lots of fear and anxiety from the inclusive classroom, which is mainly linked to the low self-efficacy and poor knowledge of inclusive practices. Most teachers acknowledge that they either have very poor or no knowledge in inclusive practices, particularly about the specific types of disability and as said, specific skills and ways how to handle difficult situations in the class. This finding of the study indicates the need for improved teacher training programs, where the educators will be able to acquire knowledge about different types of disability, as well as the need to enable them to have more exposure to SEN students during the teacher education programs.

Data indicated that attitudes vary depending on the grade level and subject area of a teacher. Teachers at higher grades, especially those teaching English and Math, are more hostile to the idea of inclusion compared to other teachers (e.g., art, music) or those instructing at primary grades. They sort students as capable or ‘ineducable,’ while making emphasis for the need to use separated environment for SEN students.

Factors and Variables Influencing Teachers Attitudes

Prior contact and interaction with PWDs are positively related to the attitudes toward inclusion among teachers of Georgia. The overall data allows us to conclude that contact with PWDs is an important factor for the shaping positive attitudes toward inclusion.

As data analysis also revealed, training in inclusive practices is a predictor for both special educators and

general education teachers. The ‘willingness to include’ of the group of trained teachers is higher than that of the group of teachers without training. However, the biggest difference is between those who did not receive training at all and those had long-term training or got formal education. Data analysis indicates that the training variable is a predictor of self-efficacy. Like other comparisons, short-term training/no-training does not significantly change the level of success achieved with SEN students, although long-term training explains variability in terms of perceived self-efficacy. It should be noted that this finding could have an important implication for the development of teacher education programs, including the need of pre-service training. It clearly shows that scattered and short-term trainings on which the Government spends most of the resources, do not make any tangible difference. Neither teachers’ certification proves to be making any difference in this regard, since passing the professional test only requires only general understanding of inclusion. What makes a difference, is a deeper knowledge of inclusive practices coupled with hands-on experience and exposure to SEN students.

The degree of institutional support also affects self-efficacy. This finding shows that throughout the development of inclusive education, it is important that school-level support is provided, which includes diverse aspects, including provision of resources, support from the school leadership and a school’s collaborative culture.

Both quantitative and qualitative data clearly illustrate that the benefit of inclusion for teachers is associated with social and emotional development of students. Most teachers believe that inclusive education is mutually beneficial (for children with SEN and those with typical development) for building ties, acceptance, equality, tolerance, and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the context of the global discourse on inclusion, teachers’ attitudes are pivotal in realizing inclusive education. This study aimed to explore Georgian teachers’ attitudes and resistance toward including SEN students in regular classrooms.

The study unveils Georgian teachers’ understanding of inclusion, their attitudes, and the underlying factors shaping their perspectives on SEN inclusion. The study concludes that contact and exposure play a critical role in shaping positive attitudes. Notably, general education teachers exhibit more opposition to inclusion compared

to special education teachers. While teachers outwardly display neutral attitudes, this study uncovers an 'ableist' tendency. Teachers view inclusion through a medical lens, focusing on diagnoses and child conditions rather than the external barriers. The research aligns with global literature, confirming that disability type and severity influence teachers' inclination to include. Training in inclusive practices predicts positive attitudes among both special and general educators. Long-term and formal education outperform short-term training, suggesting a need for comprehensive training aligned with deep understanding of disability. Certified teachers don't differ significantly, as certification often requires surface-level inclusion knowledge.

Attitudes vary among primary and secondary teachers due to distinct challenges. This underscores the necessity for tailored teacher training and institutional support. The study underscores the significance of contact and profound understanding of disability.

Findings also have policy implications for teacher training in Georgia.

Research indicates that teachers' classroom practices are greatly influenced by their attitudes and perspectives (Mushoriwa, 2001), while in contrast, negative attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities can result in poor accommodations and adjustments in the class (Damianidou & Phtiaka, 2018). Research further sug-

gests strong positive correlation between teacher's positive attitude and teacher effectiveness, i.e., teacher's efforts to utilize practice attempts (Elliott, 2008). Based on this knowledge, it is important to pursue research on how teachers' attitudes are translated into daily teaching practices at the classrooms of Georgia. The second possible avenue of research could illuminate the attitudes of pre-service teachers to provide more in depth understanding for the preservice teacher training policy in Georgia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my gratitude to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, United States Department of State, and the Institute of International Education, which supported this study through the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program, and Teachers College, Columbia University (Prof. Gita Steiner-Khamsi) for hosting me in the capacity of a Visiting Scholar. Also, my dear friend Prof. Maia Chankseliani and my colleague Khatuna Nachkebia for their invaluable guidance and support.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, United States Department of State, and the Institute of International Education through the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program under Grant PS00332613.

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