

Georgian Preschool Teachers' Attitudes Towards Inclusion

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Abstract

This study focuses on the attitudes of preschool teachers in Georgia towards inclusive education by examining teachers' attitudes towards early inclusive education, their willingness to include children with various disorders in their groups, their assessment of resources needed for inclusive education, and the factors influencing their attitudes. A quantitative survey method was employed, utilizing the Teacher Attitude to Inclusion Scale (TAIS) adapted for the preschool education environment. The questionnaire collected demographic data, assessed teachers' willingness to involve children with disabilities, evaluated the adequacy of resources, and examined teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. The study included 115 preschool teachers from Telavi Municipality and the Imereti Region in Georgia. The data was collected through an electronic questionnaire in January 2022. Preschool teachers generally had a positive attitude towards inclusive education, but challenges remain. Teachers' willingness to include children with different difficulties varies, and perceptions of resource adequacy are mixed. The factors influencing attitudes include experience, qualifications, disabilities, and available support. Insufficient resources and qualified professionals are identified issues. Addressing these challenges through enhanced resources, support, and training is crucial for successful inclusion. Further research is needed to understand the factors influencing attitudes and develop effective strategies for inclusive preschool education.

Key words: preschool teachers' attitudes, inclusive education, preschool education, SEN children.

1. Introduction

Since the termination of preschool education programs in 2011, higher education institutions in Georgia have ceased to implement preschool education programs, and there has been a serious shortage of preschool teachers. In addition, preschool education became a field subordinate to the local self-government and a completely different direction was given to its development. Therefore, all the innovations that emerged in the educational space during these years were not reflected in a preschool institution which is a preparational stage for general education. The last 5-6 years have been relatively progressive in this regard, when a number of active measures were taken with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, UNICEF and a number of different institutions. However, this was not enough and the problems remained. This is evidenced by a multi-indicator cluster survey conducted by UNICEF (Early Development and Education in Georgia. Association for Education Policy and Research, 2020). According to the study, based on the data from 57 municipalities, 44% of preschool teachers and 50% of managers had no formal education in Early Education, which clearly affects the results of the activities of these institutions. Most of these preschool teachers did not regularly participate in professional development activities. For these objective reasons,

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in Georgia preschool education is not carried out at the proper level. Correspondingly, it does not have a proper impact on the child's development, and it does not fully meet the requirements of quality early inclusive education.

Education is inclusive when all children, regardless of their disabilities, attend kindergarten or school and are involved in their age group or class (Early inclusive education. Basics. 2019). One of the crucial factors for quality early inclusive education is managers and preschool teachers' proper education, which implies meeting the basic requirements of a child's development and learning and implementation of inclusive education (Early Inclusive Education. 2019a, b). The Georgian Professional Standard of the Preschool Teacher (2017) clearly defines the requirements for the professional readiness of the teacher in terms of inclusive education:

- The teacher knows the existing legislation in the field of inclusive education and the principles of inclusive education;
- The teacher is aware of various disorders that hinder the child's learning and independent functioning; and promotes the learning and development of a child with special educational needs.

It should be noted that these requirements are not met by the current conditions and obviously, without effective measures taken to promote the professional growth of preschool teachers, it will be impossible to achieve these standards (Early and Preschool Education Standard Guide, 2019). As mentioned above, over the years, the implementation of preschool-inclusive education, which requires a number of effective measures and decision-making, has been a challenge. This urgency is reinforced by the research provided by UNICEF (Early Development and Education in Georgia. Association for Education Policy and Research, 2020), according to which the rate of child involvement in the preschool education system (69.5%) in Georgia is much lower than in Europe (95%). The percentage is even lower among ethnic minority groups, children with disabilities, and children from socially vulnerable and rural households.

Furthermore, Georgia's commitment to various international treaties on child rights, ratified through the state's endorsement, obliges it to uphold the rights and welfare of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, offers a comprehensive framework for safeguarding children's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. According to Spandagou et al. (2020), there is a higher level of consensus regarding the organization of educational systems and settings to achieve inclusivity than there is about the concept and implementation of inclusive pedagogy and practices. This also poses a challenge for educators seeking a definitive understanding of how to effectively practice inclusion.

Decades of research investigations have contributed to an expanding body of literature that illustrates the advantages of inclusion for all children. This has led to the following findings as outlined by Winton (2016, p. 59):

- Inclusion can be advantageous for both young children with and without disabilities, and the majority of families hold a positive perspective on inclusion.
- The successful implementation of inclusion depends on specific essential factors. These factors include the faithful application of research-based instructional methods (e.g., embedded interventions) for children with disabilities, along with robust collaboration among parents, teachers, and specialists within the inclusive context.
- There is a crucial need for professional development focused on inclusion to ensure the availability of high-quality inclusion services and programs for young children with disabilities. However, it is noted that early childhood professionals may not receive adequate preparation during their preservice education or sufficient support in their job roles to effectively implement inclusion.

In this study, we will investigate several key factors that influence the successful implementation of early inclusive education:

1. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion: Teachers have been recognized as pivotal in the effective execution of inclusive education, with their positive attitudes playing a significant role in its success.
2. Teachers' willingness to Include children with disabilities in the classroom: This factor is crucial for the achievement of successful inclusive education, as it reflects the teacher's intention to actively incorporate students with disabilities into the classroom environment.
3. Adequacy of available resources and support at nursery schools: The presence of sufficient resources and support within nursery schools is another essential element that impacts the success of early inclusive education.

It is evident that there has been a shift in recent years toward more positive attitudes and increased willingness among preschool teachers to embrace diversity and accommodate children with disabilities. Considering the current requirements in preschool education, it has become imperative to investigate the attitudes of Georgian preschool teachers towards early inclusive education, their willingness to work with children with various disorders, their assessment of resources needed for inclusive education, and the factors influencing their attitudes. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind to be carried out in Georgia.

2. Literature Review

Preschool teachers play a crucial role in shaping the educational experience of young children, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Their attitudes and willingness to accommodate children with disabilities significantly impact the inclusivity and overall success of inclusive preschool settings. Several key studies shed light on preschool teachers' preparations and attitudes to inclusive education.

In Norway, there has been a growing emphasis on the significance of the quality of special educational needs (SEN) support in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Numerous challenges have been identified in this regard, including the scarcity of special needs education (SNE) within early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programs. The study conducted by Hanssen and Olsen in 2022 aimed to investigate how graduates of ECTE programs are being prepared to assist children with SEN, the extent of SNE instruction they received during their ECTE bachelor studies, and their self-assessment of their SNE competence. A total of 51 graduates participated in an online survey. The majority of respondents indicated that they received only a limited number of hours of SNE instruction during their studies. Their feedback, provided in qualitative responses, suggested that SNE topics were given cursory treatment and were rarely discussed by their instructors. Furthermore, they assessed their own SNE competence as being quite low and expressed a significant need for more knowledge in the field of SNE. These findings imply that, in the view of the participants, the SNE education they received within ECTE was insufficient to equip them, as future early childhood education and care teachers, with the necessary competence required to meet the heterogeneity of children in ECEC.

Diana et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the knowledge and attitudes of preschool educators regarding inclusive education in Central Java, Indonesia. The research involved 138 participants, including school principals, curriculum developers, and teachers, who completed a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires. The study's findings revealed that, on the whole, preschool teachers displayed a positive attitude and a high level of acceptance toward children with special needs in their school settings. However, they expressed challenges in effectively accommodating these children due to perceived gaps in their knowledge and skills required for inclusive education. The research emphasized the crucial need for specialized training to enhance the professional competence of teachers in addressing the unique needs of children with special requirements in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, it underscored the importance of placing greater emphasis on inclusive practices within early childhood education institutions, including preschools.

Sari, Çeliköz, and Seçer's (2009) study investigated the attitudes and self-efficacy of both preschool teachers and student teachers in Turkey regarding inclusive education. Their goal was to establish a connection between self-efficacy and attitudes regarding inclusion. The study employed two assessment tools: the Opinions Relative to Inclusion Scale and the Teacher Self-efficacy Perception Scale. The results of the study indicated that the attitudes of both preschool education teachers and student teachers were somewhat uncertain, but both groups believed in their ability to teach effectively. Notably, student teachers exhibited more positive attitudes toward inclusive education, whereas teachers scored higher in terms of self-confidence. The study emphasized the importance of incorporating additional courses related to special educational needs in the university education of student teachers and the provision of increased support services for teachers to enable them to effectively educate children with special needs (Sari et al., 2009).

Hoskin, Boyle, and Anderson (2015) conducted a study aimed at examining pre-service preschool teachers in order to identify the factors that contribute to positive attitudes regarding inclusive education in Australia. The study included 139 early education students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. The results revealed that, in general, the participants held favorable attitudes toward inclusive education, although they expressed concerns about their ability to effectively implement it. Interestingly, personal experiences with individuals having special needs and practical classroom exposure did not have a significant impact on their attitudes but did boost their perceptions of self-efficacy. These findings pointed to the presence of distinctive factors influencing the attitudes of pre-service preschool teachers and called for adjustments in pre-service preschool education programs, as well as suggesting directions for future research (Hoskin et al., 2015).

Nonis et al. (2016) research focused on exploring the attitudes of kindergarten teachers and learning support for educators in Singapore regarding the inclusion of children with developmental needs and learning difficulties in preschools. The study involved 50 participants who completed a survey questionnaire and participated in a group interview session. The findings indicated that the teachers held positive attitudes towards integrating children with developmental learning needs into regular kindergarten classrooms. Additionally, the study disclosed concerns of preschool teachers regarding the lack of necessary training and support in the preschool sector at the time of the research. The study results indicate the need for teacher training and support to effectively include children with diverse needs in regular classrooms.

Research on teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities, especially in public schools, reveals ongoing concerns and challenges. While teachers generally express support for inclusion in principle, they often raise practical feasibility concerns. For instance, a meta-synthesis by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) covering research from 1958 to 1995 found no significant shift in attitudes over that period (as cited in Spandagou et al. 2016). Regarding their willingness to include students into their classrooms, it emerged that their willingness was low when it came to students with severe disability, who required additional resources from them. The explanation offered is that teachers' responses to students with disabilities are influenced more by procedural classroom concerns, which have seen limited improvement over the years, rather than by social prejudice and attitudes towards social integration, which have shown some progress. While societal attitudes toward people with disabilities have become more positive, the education system itself has seen little change in how it educates students in inclusive settings.

To conclude, these studies reveal the attitudes of preschool teachers and educators toward inclusive education across different contexts and regions. While there is a general consensus among participants in these studies regarding the positive aspects of inclusive education, challenges related to self-efficacy and practical implementation remain prevalent. The findings emphasize the importance of specialized training and support for educators, both pre-service and in-service, to bridge the gap between positive attitudes and effective inclusive practices. Furthermore, these studies call for revisions in educational programs to better prepare teachers for the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. The positivism paradigm was adopted for the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018) and research questions were the following:

1. What is the attitude of teachers towards early inclusive education?
2. To what extent are the teachers willing to include a child with various disorders in a group?
3. How do teachers assess the available resources needed for early inclusive education in kindergarten?
4. What factors influence the attitude of the teachers towards inclusion?
5. How do teachers evaluate their work and support of kindergartens in relation to the child with SEN?

3.1. Methods

Quantitative method – the survey was selected as a research tool. It was decided to use as a tool, the Teacher Attitude to Inclusion Scale (TAIS), based on the Larrivee and Cook (1979) Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming Scale (ORMS). The instrument was piloted in a study by Monsen, Ewing, and Boyle (2015) involving 95 English school teachers. The authors of the study believe that the Teacher Attitude Scale for Inclusion is a robust and easy-to-administer tool for teacher attitudes.

The TAIS questionnaire was adapted for this study to the preschool education environment and preschool teachers' behavior. The questionnaire assessed the readiness of teachers for the involvement of different types of SEN children in the kindergarten environment. According to studies, involving children with certain disorders is more problematic than children with typical development. Questions were formulated about the impact of adequate support for the teacher in early inclusive education (Goodman & Burton, 2010). Similarly, the experience of working with SEN children affects teacher attitudes toward inclusion (Forlin et al, 2008; Gibb et al, 2007; Goodman & Burton, 2010).

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first section gathered demographic data, including gender, age of teachers, work experience, education level, contact with children with special educational needs (SEN), age group of children in their care, and the number of children in each group.

The second section dealt with the teachers' willingness to include children with SEN in educational programs and activities. This section aimed to measure preschool teachers' openness to involving children with various disabilities, such as physical impairments (e.g., hearing or sight), behavioral issues, social challenges, emotional difficulties, and/or learning disabilities. The questionnaire employed an eight-point scale to assess teachers' readiness to work with children with different disorders within their groups.

The third section of the questionnaire assessed the adequacy of educational resources available for inclusive education. Several variables were included to evaluate the support provided to preschool teachers, such as the availability of a resource room, specialist or special teacher, psychologist, developmental materials, parental assistance, behavioral therapist, group assistant or aide, general kindergarten support, and support from colleagues. Respondents were asked to rate the adequacy of each resource on an eight-point scale, with higher scores indicating a greater match between the resource and the teachers' needs.

The last, fourth section, examined teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, based on the second part of Larrivee and Cook's (1979) ORMS, and reflects teachers' attitudes toward the concept of inclusion. This section primarily included 30 statements designed to assess school teachers' general attitudes toward SEN children. For the purpose of the study, the number of statements was reduced to 27 and substantially adapted to the work of the teacher in preschool environment. Considering the preschool conditions in Georgia, three statements from the fourth section have been omitted from the research instrument, and each section

includes a varying number of factors. In this section, the questions are divided into four topics, namely, the scale is multidimensional: (1) problems with the inclusion of SEN children in groups; (2) the social benefits of SEN children inclusion in groups; (3) the impact of inclusion on the educational process; and (4) the impact of inclusion on the teacher responding to the needs of children with SEN. It is important to mention that this specific type of research was conducted in Georgia for the first time. The data was collected through the electronic questionnaire in Google Forms in January 2022.

3.3. Participants

Initially, preschool teachers from Telavi Municipality, Georgia were invited to take part in the study. However, in order to get the appropriate number of study participants, preschool teachers from western Georgia, particularly, from the Imereti Region were encouraged to participate in the study. As a result, the questionnaire was completed by 115 teachers. The survey results give us a 95% generalization and therefore the survey error is $\pm 5\%$.

3.4. Results and analysis

3.4.1 Results of the first section

This first section contained demographic information. It should be noted that in the study the respondents could not be divided by gender as only female teachers are employed in preschool settings. Consequently, in analyzing the results, gender could not be used as a variable. As for the age groups of teachers, the youngest was 23 years old, and the oldest - 74 years old; the mean - 44 (standard deviation 9.37); the mode - 37; 75% of the respondents who were employed in the kindergartens were between 30 and 49 years old.

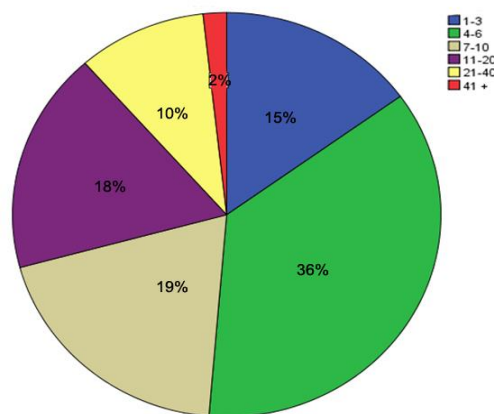


Figure 1. Preschool teachers' work experience

As for the experience of working as a preschool teacher, the least work experience was 1 year, and the most experienced staff - 48 years. The mean is - 10.2 (standard deviation 9.86) (See Figure 1).

According to the Law on Early Childhood and Preschool Education, preschool groups are divided into the following age categories: 2 to 3 years, 3 to 4 years; 4 to 5 years, and above 5 years, before entering the first grade of primary school. Respondents had to work with these age categories, however, there were those who had to work with mixed age groups of 2 - 6 years, 2 - 4 years and 3 - 6 years.

The number of children in preschool groups varied: A minimum of 5 children and a maximum of 40-42 children were in groups; in kindergartens of the surveyed regions, the average number of children in a group was 23.5 (standard deviation 8.2). According to the number of children in the groups, in 48% of the kindergartens, there were large groups with 21 to 30 children in each. After the demographic section, the questions were related to the topic of SEN children. In particular, if a teacher had a relationship with SEN children. Accordingly, 46% of respondents answered positively that they had had contact with and worked with such children, 7% stated that they rarely had contact, and 46% did not have the opportunity to do so (See Figure 2).

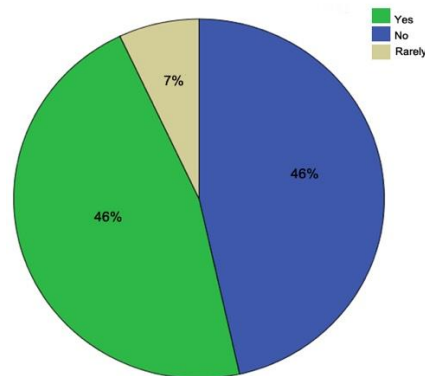


Figure 2. Preschool teachers' relationship with SEN children

Teachers who had previous or current experience working with children with special educational needs (SEN) provided more detailed information about their experiences. Among them, 22% had to work with SEN children in the previous year, while 26% had a child with SEN in their current group during the study. Additionally, 12% mentioned that they had interactions with SEN children both in kindergarten and within the family. Among the respondents, 28% reported having contact with an SEN child only in the kindergarten setting, but this child was not part of their specific group. Furthermore, 10% of the teachers stated that they had a relative with an SEN condition and had gained experience in this field.

This section also included an open-ended question regarding the educational qualifications of the respondents. Among the respondents, 56% mentioned that they had received higher education. Specifically, 32% had obtained a bachelor's degree, 9% held a vocational degree, and 1% had incomplete higher and secondary education. After examining the educational background, it was of interest to determine whether the respondents had received any training in inclusive education. According to the responses, 34% had taken university courses, 12% had participated in training courses, and 2% had gained practical work experience. On the other hand, 52% of the respondents had not undergone any courses or training in inclusive education. For those who had received training, they gave information about the organizations that provided the training. Three organizations were identified in this regard: World Vision, Georgian Portage Association, and Mac Georgia.

3.4.2. Results of the Second Section

As previously mentioned, the second section of the questionnaire measured teachers' attitude to the participation of children with different types and levels of disorders in educational programs and activities. This section utilized an 8-point Likert scale to assess three levels of difficulty: severe, moderate, and mild. The scale was designed to measure the respondents' willingness to include a child with each difficulty level in their preschool classroom. A score of 1 indicated a definite willingness to include such

a child, while a score of 8 indicated a definite unwillingness. The responses varied significantly, indicating that the degree of difficulty had a notable impact on the respondents' answers.

To analyze the assessment results, the percentage distribution of average scores was employed, following an international standard and statistical formula (Monsen, Ewing & Boyle, 2015). The scale defined four levels of readiness for engagement: high, moderate, and low acceptance. The range for high acceptance scores was 0-2.4, indicating a strong willingness to include children with difficulties in the classroom. The range for moderate acceptance scores was 2.41-5.6, signifying a moderate level of acceptance. Finally, the range for low acceptance scores was 5.61-8, indicating a lower willingness to include children with difficulties in the classroom.

The table shows the average scores distributed in 9 different types of disorders with three degrees, showing acceptance for a particular form of disorder (See Table 1).

Table 1. The average score for high acceptance ranges from 0-2.4; Moderate acceptance - 2.41-5.6 and Low acceptance 5.61-8. (Above 5 -)

Disorders	Degree of Disorder		
	Mild	Moderate	Severe
Hearing Impaired	2.66	3.32	5.10
Behavioral Disorder	2.18	3.08	5.10
Emotional disorder	2.30	2.89	4.83
Physical Disorder	2.59	3.33	4.98
Gifted	1.78	1.79	2.55
Visual impairment	2.60	3.18	4.91
Learning Disabilities	2.32	2.75	3.93
Speech Disorder	2.09	2.49	3.71
Multiple disorder	3.32	3.99	5.40

The table depicts the drastic change in the willingness of inclusion of children from mild to severe disorders in the group. However, average acceptance range is still observed in all types of disorders. In particular, the average score, which is on the 8-point scale between 2.41-5.6, shows the teachers' mood and for some if it is difficult to work with a child with a severe disorder, for some it is moderately difficult. Below the indicators for each type of disorder is discussed.

Hearing impairment

Working with children with mild hearing impairment is not difficult for the teacher, however, even in the case of moderate and mild hearing impairment, the average score varies dramatically, although the score for working with a child with severe hearing impairment is quite high and can be said to be on the verge of high difficulty: the mean for working with a child with a minor

difficulty is 2.6; With a child with a moderate disorder - 3.32 and with a child with a severe disorder - 5.1. The difference between the mean scores of attitudes toward working with children with mild and severe hearing impairment is 2.5. Overall, the average score of all three characteristics is recorded on the scale of the average acceptance range, which shows that working with children with hearing impairment is difficult according to the assessment of preschool teachers (See Table 1).

Behavioral disorders

As for children with behavioral disorders, in this case, the mild disorder has a high acceptance of 2.18 points, after which the moderate and severe disorder already falls into the average acceptance rate: The mean is 3.08 and the highest score is 5.1. With the aggravation of the difficulty, according to the preschool teachers, the work with a child becomes more and more complicated and their attitude changes more and more. The disorder of the mild form of behavior is not a problem for them, and in the case of moderate and severe forms, the number of points and categorization also change, the difference between them is 2.82 (See Table 1).

Emotional disorders

The indicators with children with emotional disorders are similar to the case of behavioral disorders and in moderate and severe cases the categorization and the average score changed. With mild forms- 2.3, moderate - 2.89 and severe - 4.83. As for the difference between the average scores between the average rates of severe and mild forms of emotional distress - 2.53 (See Table 1).

Physical disabilities

As for the children with physical disabilities, in this case, the average score of all three forms of the disorder falls on the moderate section of the average admission scale, however, the difference between the scores is still sharp due to the form of the disorder: mild - 2.59 points, medium - 3.3 and severe - 4.98, the difference between severe and mild - 2.39 (See Table 1).

Giftedness

The attitude of preschool teachers towards gifted (children with high abilities) is noteworthy. Most of the respondents have a positive attitude towards light and medium cases of giftedness and these two indicators are in the high acceptance section of the scale, while the strongly expressed form is already placed in the average acceptance section: Mild - 1.78 and medium - 1.79, with almost no difference, while the average score on the strongly expressed giftedness is 2.55, and the difference between the light and strongly expressed forms is 0.77 (See Table 1).

Visual impairment

As for children with sight problems, all answers fall within the range of moderate acceptance according: Minor - 2.6 points; medium - 3.18; and severe - 4.91.

Learning disabilities

The next issue of the study was related to learning disabilities, where high acceptance for minor disorders with 2.32 points was observed, and for moderate and severe disorders, moderate acceptance: Medium Disorder - 2.75, and Severe Disorder - 3.93, however, the average score is still on the scale towards high admission and as it turns out, preschool teachers may have more experience working with such children. The difference between severe and minor is 1.61 points (See Table 1).

Speech disorder

The next parameter was speech disorder for which preschool teachers had a fairly high acceptance. In particular, for minor - 2.09 points, and for moderate and severe disorders, above-average acceptance - 2.49, and for severe - 3.71 points, the difference between severe and mild - 1.62 points (See Table 1).

Multiple disorders

In the second block of the questionnaire, the last parameter was multiple disorders where low acceptance was observed. Moderate acceptance was found for mild and medium forms, but close to low acceptance for severe forms. Finally, the average scores were as follows – mild form - 3.32 points, medium - 3.99 points, severe - 5.4, the difference is 2.08.

3.4.3. Results of the Third Section

In this section, the questions were asked about the adequacy of resources to the needs of preschool teachers, how a special room is arranged, how resources are distributed, and so on. In this case, the answers were marked on an 8-point Likert scale, with 1 point indicating a very low adequacy and 8 a very high. This scale was based on the Likert bipolar scale model, which involves measuring the negative and positive attitudes, namely 1,2,3,4 is considered a negative indicator and 5,6,7,8 a positive indicator.

According to the first parameter, where the respondents had to evaluate the adequacy of special rooms in the kindergarten, only 16% of the respondents recorded a positive answer, and 84% - a negative one. In the next component, which included the adequacy of the work of special teachers in the kindergarten, in particular, whether the special education qualification meets the requirements, in this case, 74% of respondents gave a negative evaluation and 12% - positive evaluation, indicating a shortage of qualified staff in preschool education. The mean was 2.34, which is considered a rather low score on the Likert scale.

When evaluating human resources, in the third indicator, psychologists and their adequacy to the needs of preschool teachers, 80% of respondents rated it negatively and 20% - positively. The mean was 2.34, which is quite low in this case as well.

A relatively better situation was observed in terms of infrastructure. In particular, the evaluation of the development material has a mean - 3.96, which is relatively high compared to previous parameters, and it shows a better picture in nursery schools in this regard. According to the percentages, 26% evaluated it with a very low score, and 11% - with a very high score; overall, it is evaluated positively by 41%, and negatively - by 59% (See figure 3).

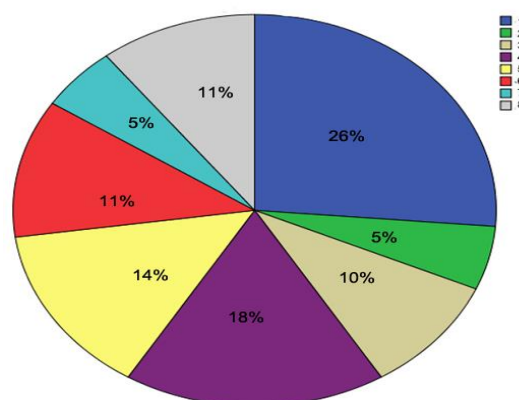


Figure 3. Evaluation of the adequacy of developmental materials. 1,2,3,4 is considered a negative indicator and 5,6,7,8 a positive indicator

24% of the respondents evaluated the assistance of a caregiver in the educational process with a very low grade and 22% with a very high grade. As for the mean, this figure is 4.58 points. 52% rated positively, while 48% - negatively.

When evaluating the adequacy of behavior therapists, the majority of respondents (81%) provided a very low assessment. This low assessment was primarily attributed to the shortage of professional staff in preschool. On the other hand, a small proportion of respondents (8%) rated the adequacy of behavior therapists as very high. In terms of bipolar distribution, 87% of respondents evaluated it negatively and 13% - positively, the mean was 1.82.

The next factor was about the adequacy of the group assistant/ assistant in the kindergarten, which was assessed by 45% of the respondents with a very low score, and 27% - very positively. Overall, 59% of answers were negative and 41% - positive. The mean was 3.96 (See Figure 4).

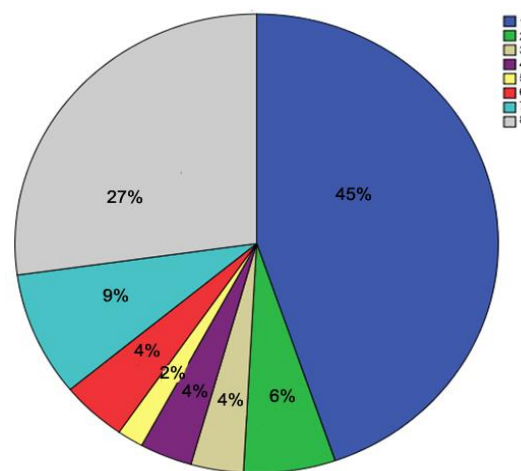


Figure 4. Evaluation of the adequacy of an assistant in a group. The negative and positive attitudes - namely 1,2,3,4 is considered a negative indicator and 5,6,7,8 a positive indicator

The respondents were asked to rate the overall support provided by the kindergarten for children with special educational needs (SEN). Out of the respondents, 11% rated the support as very low, whereas 46% rated it as very high. In total, 75% of the respondents evaluated the support positively, while 25% evaluated it negatively. The mean for the support was 6.04 points.

When working with SEN children, one of the most important components is colleagues' support, because on the one hand, acceptance is important, and on the other hand, support in the work process is an essential social behavior. 53% of respondents rated the support of colleagues with a high score, while 11% - with a very low score, a total of 78% - positive, and 22% - negative, with a mean of 6.27.

At the end of the third block of the questionnaire, the preschool teachers evaluated the process of their work with children with SEN, which was evaluated with a maximum score of 21% and a minimum score of - 8%. The mean was 5.53. Overall, 76% evaluated it positively and 24% negatively.

The final question in this section of the questionnaire focused on how preschool teachers evaluate the support provided by the kindergarten in working with children with special educational needs (SEN). The results showed that 82% of the respondents rated the support positively, while 18% rated it negatively. The mean for the evaluation was 6.26. Overall, preschool support is rated quite positively despite the problems and the lack of proper support. The positive share in the overall assessment is much higher

than the negative. As the results of the third part of the questionnaire showed, the resources and support were evaluated quite positively, but the mean of the evaluation of the specialists was 2, which is quite low on the scale.

3.4.4. Results of the Fourth Section

The fourth section of the study was designed with distinct parameters. This block of the questionnaire was divided into four components, comprising a total of 27 questions. Each component contained a varying number of questions. It is important to highlight that, in comparison to the British pilot version which had 30 questions and was originally used to survey school teachers, 27 out of the 30 questions were adaptable for preschool teachers. However, three questions could not be adapted to the specific context of Georgia and the preschool setting. The respondents had to choose an answer on an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 8, where 1 indicated "strongly agree" and 8 indicated "strongly disagree."

In this block, the questions are divided into four topics with corresponding statements, namely, the scale is multidimensional: (1) problems involving children with disabilities in groups (7, 23, 11, 9, 19, 5); (2) the social benefits of inclusion in a group of children with disabilities (10, 21, 18, 14); (3) the impact of inclusion on learning practice (27, 13, 20, 24); And (4) the impact of inclusion on the caregiver-teacher responding to the needs of children with SEN (22, 3, 12, 2).

A number of unequal factors are found in each component used to calculate the mean scores in all four components. For example, for the first factor (1) the mean score is calculated from 6 parameters, while for the second factor (2) the average score is calculated from four parameters, also the third and fourth components are calculated from the average of 4 factors.

- A score greater than 1 standard deviation (SD) above the mean score for a dimension is considered a 'high' score.
- A score lower than 1 standard deviation (SD) below the mean score for a dimension is considered a 'low' score.

Consider the four components listed in the fourth block:

1. Problems involving children with disabilities in groups: "High" score > 4.89; 'Low' score < 2.17;
2. Social benefits of inclusion in a group of children with disabilities: "High" score > 4.54; 'Low' score < 2.53;
3. Impact of inclusion on learning practice: "High" score > 5.24; 'Low' score < 2.14;
4. Impact of inclusion on the educator-teacher who responds to the needs of children with disabilities: "High" score > 5.61; "Low" score < 2.37.

As can be seen from Table (Table 2) and also shown in the diagram, means for the four components, where only one, the second component (social benefits of inclusion in the group of children with disabilities) hit the low scores section and the other three components within the moderate scores' distribution range.

The correlation between the sections is moderate, with a particularly strong correlation between the third and fourth components. The correlation percentages for the relationships are as follows: I - II: 52.2%; I - III: 50.1%; I - IV: 50.1%; II - III: 42.7%; II - IV: 42.7%; III - IV: 100%. These correlation values indicate that teachers' inclusive education has a significant impact on the needs of children with disabilities. The strong correlation between these two sections further confirms this relationship ($p > 0.001$).

Table 2. Means of four components

Statements	Means of score of the components			
	I	II	III	IV
It is difficult to maintain order when there is an SEN child in the group.	4.13			

Parents of children with SEN are no bigger problem than parents of other children.	3.77			
Inclusion of children with disabilities requires significant changes in group work.	2.81			
The behavior of SEN children is a bad example for other children.	4.89			
SEN children need to be told exactly what to do and how.	2.17			
Extra attention to children with disabilities is detrimental to other children.	3.90			
Isolation of a SEN child in a special room has negative social and emotional consequences.		2.53		
Increased freedom in the group creates confusion.		3.82		
Inclusion of children with SEN is beneficial for children with typical development.		3.33		
Preschool teachers have sufficient training to work with children with SEN.		4.54		
The presence of SEN children increases acceptance in other children.			2.14	
Relationship with other children can be detrimental for SEN children.			5.24	
Inclusion is likely to have a negative effect on the emotional development of children with ASD.			5.14	
Inclusion of children with ASD requires intensive training of the educator-teacher.			1.73	
A child with a disability is socially isolated from other children.				5.61
A teacher has to be more patient with SEN children than other children.				2.37
Most SEN children behave well in kindergarten.				3.76
Special, separate work best responds to the needs of children with SEN.				3.47

Preschool teachers' recommendations

At the end of the questionnaire respondents shared their views and recommendations:

- Working with a SEN child requires specific knowledge and requires a properly trained caregiver;
- SEN children should be involved in the learning process with their peers;
- It is necessary to have a special teacher in an inclusive group;
- Systematic training of preschool teachers is needed;
- An assistant and resource room are necessary for the inclusion of a SEN child in kindergarten;
- Learning environment and resource adequacy are essential for successful work with a SEN child;
- In the kindergarten where there is a child with SEN, it is necessary to have a psychologist, a behavior therapist and a special educator;
- A child with disabilities should not be discriminated against and should be treated equally with other children;
- Systematic and continuous training of preschool teachers is necessary;

- The presence of a child in the SEN group develops social relationships in children in general;
- Access to children with disabilities in educational institutions (kindergarten, school, vocational, university) is important;
- It is important to develop an individual approach to children with disabilities to increase their integration and involvement.

The respondents' views and recommendations highlight the importance of specialized knowledge, an inclusive environment, and dedicated support for children with SEN. They emphasize the need for trained caregivers, involving SEN children in the learning process alongside their peers, and having special teachers and resources in inclusive settings. Continuous training for preschool teachers, access to professionals such as psychologists and behavior therapists, and equal treatment for children with disabilities are also emphasized. The respondents recognize the positive impact of inclusion on social relationships and stress the significance of access to educational institutions. Overall, their recommendations emphasize individualized approaches and greater integration for children with disabilities.

3.6. Discussion

The present study confirmed the findings that *the attitude of preschool teachers towards inclusive education* is generally positive, although there are some challenges and areas for improvement. A significant percentage of preschool teachers have had contact with and worked with children with SEN. Approximately 46% of the respondents stated that they have had contact and work experience with SEN children, while 7% mentioned rare contact and 46% did not have the opportunity to work with SEN children. This suggests that a considerable number of preschool teachers have experience in inclusive education.

Another promising finding was the willingness of preschool teachers to work with children with varying levels of difficulties, ranging from mild to moderate and severe. This not only reflects their acceptance but also highlights their knowledge in the field, enabling them to effectively engage with children with SEN. When it comes to the willingness to include children with different degrees of difficulties in the classroom, the results vary depending on the specific disorder. The results provide an overview of the average scores and acceptance ranges for different types of disorders, such as hearing impairment, behavioral disorders, emotional disorders, physical disabilities, giftedness, visual impairment, learning disabilities, speech disorders, and multiple disorders. In general, the average scores indicate varying degrees of acceptance for different forms of disorders. Mild forms of disorders generally receive higher acceptance scores, while moderate and severe forms receive lower scores. However, it is worth noting that none of the forms of severe difficulties received high inadmissibility, indicating a positive willingness to include children with severe disorders in the group. We presume that this result may have been influenced by the existing legislation, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), which was ratified in 2013. The presence of such legislation likely contributed to the favorable attitudes observed among the respondents in this study.

Regarding the adequacy of resources and support for inclusive education, the results show mixed perceptions. The evaluation of special rooms, special teachers' qualifications, psychologists' adequacy, behavior therapists, and group assistants received relatively lower scores, indicating some deficiencies in these areas. On the other hand, evaluations related to development material, parental or caregiver assistance, general support of the kindergarten for SEN children, colleagues' support, and the overall process of working with SEN children received higher scores, indicating more positive perceptions in these aspects.

Despite some positive assessments, there are clear indications of insufficient resources and a shortage of qualified professionals in early inclusive education. However, the overall evaluations lean towards a positive perception of the support provided, highlighting areas that require improvement to better cater to the needs of children with special needs.

The study results highlight several factors influencing the attitude of teachers toward inclusion:

1. Experience with SEN children: Teachers who have prior experience working with children with special educational needs (SEN) may have a more positive attitude toward inclusion. 46% of respondents had contact and worked with SEN children, while 46% did not have the opportunity to do so. Having direct experience with SEN children can shape teachers' attitudes and increase their willingness to include them in the classroom.
2. Qualifications and training: The study revealed that 56% of respondents had higher education, and 34% had taken university courses or training in inclusive education. Teachers with higher education and specific training in inclusive education may have a better understanding of the needs of SEN children and feel more prepared to support their inclusion in the classroom. This can contribute to a more positive attitude towards inclusion.
3. Type and severity of disabilities: teachers may have varying levels of acceptance or difficulty when it comes to working with children with different disabilities. For example, working with children with mild hearing impairment may be perceived as less difficult compared to working with children with severe hearing impairment. The severity of the disability may impact teachers' attitudes and their perceived ability to support the child's inclusion.
4. Availability of resources and support: The study provides insights into teachers' perceptions of the adequacy of resources and support in kindergartens. Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion can be influenced by the availability and quality of resources such as special rooms, qualified staff (special teachers, psychologists, behavior therapists), development materials, and support from colleagues and the kindergarten itself. Insufficient resources and support may lead to more negative attitudes towards inclusion.

The findings are directly in line with previous findings:

Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education: The literature review, specifically the studies by Diana et al. (2020), Nonis et al. (2016), and Hoskin, Boyle, and Anderson (2015), emphasizes that educators generally hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education. This aligns with the study's findings that preschool teachers generally exhibit a positive attitude towards inclusion, especially when they have experience working with children with special educational needs (SEN).

Resource Availability: The literature review, as presented by Hanssen and Olsen (2022), highlights the challenges related to the quality of special educational needs (SEN) support and the scarcity of resources within early childhood teacher education (ECTE) programs. This mirrors the study's findings, which reveal mixed perceptions regarding the adequacy of resources and support for inclusive education. Teachers in the study also identify deficiencies in certain resource categories, such as special rooms and qualified professionals, which corroborate the literature's emphasis on these resource challenges.

Factors Influencing Attitudes: The study's findings align with the literature's insights into the factors that influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. For example, the study identifies teachers' prior experience with SEN children and their qualifications and training as factors influencing attitudes, which corresponds to the literature's discussion of how teacher preparation and experience can impact attitudes (Sari et al., 2009). Additionally, the literature review acknowledges that the type and severity of disabilities can influence educators' attitudes, mirroring the study's finding that attitudes vary depending on the specific disorder.

Need for Specialized Training: The study's call for specialized training to enhance teachers' competence in addressing the needs of children with special requirements aligns with the literature's emphasis on the importance of professional development in inclusive education (Winton, 2016; Sari et al., 2009).

The findings of the study align with and are substantiated by the existing literature on inclusive education. They offer additional empirical proof of the challenges and opportunities that preschool educators encounter in their endeavors to foster inclusion. The attitudes of preschool teachers, the availability of resources, and other factors that have an impact contribute to a more extensive

comprehension of inclusive education and emphasize the necessity for ongoing research and enhancements in teacher preparation and support for inclusive practices. These factors may not include all potential influences on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Further research and information would be required to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion in this particular context.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that preschool teachers generally hold a positive attitude towards inclusive education, supported by their experience with children with SEN. However, there are still challenges and opportunities for improvement. The willingness of teachers to integrate children with varying difficulties depends on the specific disorder, with more mild disabilities being met with greater levels of acceptance compared to those that are moderate or severe. Nevertheless, the study indicates a positive willingness to include children with severe disorders.

Perceptions regarding the adequacy of resources and support are mixed. Several factors influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, including prior experience with SEN children, qualifications and training in inclusive education, the type and severity of disabilities, and the availability of resources and support. Teachers with experience and training in inclusive education tend to exhibit more positive attitudes. The study also highlights insufficient resources and a shortage of qualified professionals in early inclusive education. While some support is appreciated, there is a need to better address the needs of children with special needs. In conclusion, while preschool teachers generally demonstrate a positive attitude towards inclusive education, it is vital to address the identified challenges and areas for improvement. Enhancing resources, providing adequate support, and offering specialized training can establish an inclusive environment that effectively supports the needs of all children in early education settings. Further research should be conducted to deepen our understanding of the factors influencing teachers' attitudes and explore additional strategies for promoting successful inclusion in preschools.

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