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Pre-service and in-service special education teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education: A questionnaire study

Sentimenti, atteggiamenti e preoccupazioni degli insegnanti di sostegno in servizio e in formazione sull'educazione inclusiva: uno studio tramite questionario

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the predictors of sentiments, attitudes, and concerns related to inclusive education among a group of 1722 pre- and in-service teachers enrolled in the Specialization course for Special Needs Activities at the University of Palermo. Utilizing the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education-Revised (SACIE-R) scale (Forlin et al., 2011a), the study explores participants' views on the inclusion of students with disabilities. The findings provide

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[1] This article is the result of the joint work of three authors. S.O. Mercer wrote sections 4, 5, and 6. Y. Falzone wrote sections 1 and 2, and R. Orofino wrote sections 3 and 7.

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valuable insights into how teaching experience, policy knowledge, and self-confidence influence attitudes toward inclusion. This research is relevant to teacher training programmes, reflecting on the initial phases and the need to provide teachers with effective mentoring and strategies to enhance preparedness from the beginning of their careers, to ultimately improve students' learning environments and outcomes.

Keywords: inclusive education, SACIE-R, teacher training, special education.

RIASSUNTO

Questo studio esamina i sentimenti, gli atteggiamenti e le preoccupazioni relative alle pratiche didattiche inclusive tra un gruppo di 1.722 insegnanti in formazione e in servizio iscritti al Corso di specializzazione per le attività di sostegno presso l'Università di Palermo. Utilizzando la scala Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education-Revised (SACIE-R) (Forlin et al., 2011a), lo studio esplora le opinioni dei partecipanti sull'inclusione scolastica degli studenti con disabilità. I risultati forniscono informazioni su come l'esperienza di insegnamento, la conoscenza delle politiche e la fiducia in sé influenzino gli atteggiamenti verso l'inclusione. Questa ricerca è rilevante per i programmi di formazione degli insegnanti, poiché riflette sulle fasi iniziali e sulla necessità di fornire agli insegnanti un supporto efficace e strategie per migliorare la loro preparazione fin dall'inizio della loro carriera, al fine di migliorare gli ambienti di apprendimento e i risultati degli studenti.

Parole chiave: educazione inclusive, SACIE-R, formazione degli insegnanti, educazione speciale.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Across Europe and other parts of the world, an increasing number of students with special educational needs (SEN) are being integrated into mainstream education rather than in specialised schools or classes. This can be partially attributed to the publication of various policy documents that advocate for the importance of inclusion (Lindner *et al.*, 2023).

Recent studies highlight how effective inclusive education depends largely on the role of teachers and in particular, their attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusion itself (Navarro-Mateu *et al.*, 2020; Supriyanto, 2019; Ewing *et al.*, 2018). In fact, a positive orientation towards inclusion is considered fundamental for the success of such practices, as it translates into improved educational outcomes for all students. Teachers who show favourable attitudes towards inclusion are more willing and prepared to adapt their teaching methods, thus responding to the different needs of students and creating an inclusive learning environment. This approach allows for the adequate support of students with a wide range of needs, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive school.

Numerous studies have shown that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion not only influence their commitment to adapting their strategies but also have a direct impact on students' sense of belonging and self-esteem (Hernandez, 2016; Saloviita, 2020). In this context, teachers' expectations and beliefs

become crucial to determine the effectiveness of inclusive processes and to promote a school culture that values diversity. Targeted training programs and institutional support are indicated as essential elements to strengthen positive attitudes among teachers, enabling them to develop specific skills to effectively manage the complexity of the inclusive classroom.

With these considerations in mind, this study examines the attitudes, sentiments and concerns towards inclusive education of a sample of Italian special education teachers, both in service and in training (*N* = 1722), enrolled in the Specialization Course for Special Needs Activities at the University of Palermo in the academic year 2023/2024. The analysis is placed in a theoretical framework that highlights the importance of studying teachers' attitudes, as these can significantly influence the effectiveness of inclusive practices and the overall quality of school inclusion. Teachers' attitudes are considered fundamental determinants for the success of inclusion, affecting both the predisposition to work with students with special educational needs and the creation of an educational environment that promotes the well-being of all students. The methodology adopted is based on the use of the scale Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised Scale (SACIE-R), an instrument chosen for its solid psychometric properties and its ability to analyse the components of attitudes towards inclusion. The scale has proven to be a valid means to accurately and thoroughly measure teachers' opinions and concerns about school inclusion, offering a multidimensional assessment of the variables that influence teachers' educational approach.

To investigate the relationships between variables as well as the predictive factors of attitudes towards inclusive education, measured by the SACIE-R and its subscales, correlation and multiple regression analyses were used. The variables included in the analyses were: knowledge of legislation and policies, teachers' confidence in their ability to teach students with disabilities and years of experience teaching students with disabilities. This study provides a significant contribution to the understanding of the factors that influence school inclusion, with relevant implications for both teacher training and future educational policies. The results obtained can support the development of targeted training programs and strategic interventions, aimed at strengthening the effectiveness of inclusive practices in schools.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The importance of special education teachers' perspectives for inclusive education

Teachers' attitudes and feelings are identified as crucial factors for supporting and integrating students with special needs. To achieve inclusion, it is not sufficient for teachers to have solely an awareness of the educational needs of their students. They must also possess particular attitudes and competencies that encompass and permit valuable learning for all students (Navarro-Mateu *et al*., 2020). Research proposes that more positive attitudes of teachers are suggestive of more inclusive learning environments and practices (Guillemot *et al*., 2022). Research conducted with students shows that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have a significant effect on the learning environment of students with special educational needs (Boyle *et al*., 2020). These attitudes can be influenced by the concerns teachers have towards inclusive education. For example, teachers' concerns about the challenges associated with inclusive education, such as insufficient knowledge, scarcity of resources and difficulties managing diverse classrooms, are key factors to be considered within the context of teacher attitudes (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Yadav *et al*., 2015). Teacher training programmes must address these concerns to nurture effectively trained teachers thus creating a more supportive,

inclusive learning environment for all students (Forlin *et al*., 2011b).

The purpose of the research conducted by Katharina-Theresa Lindner and colleagues (2023) systematically reviewed and analysed primary school teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. The study aimed to build on previous reviews by examining a comprehensive set of 36 studies to understand how teachers perceive the inclusion of all students, particularly those with special educational needs, within mainstream educational settings. The main findings of the review indicated that teachers generally hold rather neutral or ambivalent attitudes toward inclusive education. While there are instances of positive attitudes, particularly in certain contexts, the research revealed that teachers' perceptions often depend on the type of disability presented by students. Many teachers expressed reservations about fully embracing the inclusion of all students, citing concerns about the feasibility of meeting diverse needs within a single classroom. Additionally, the study highlighted significant worries regarding insufficient training and the challenges of managing time effectively to cater to all students' requirements. Overall, the findings suggest a pressing need for targeted professional development and training programs to enhance teachers' attitudes and support the successful implementation of inclusive practices in schools. Based on their findings, the authors suggest several implications for teacher training and policy aimed at improving attitudes toward inclusive education. They emphasize the importance of providing comprehensive professional development opportunities for teachers, which should focus on both theoretical knowledge and practical experience related to inclusive practices. By enhancing teachers' skills and confidence in managing diverse classrooms, these training programs can help shift attitudes in a more positive direction. They highlight the need for ongoing support and resources for teachers, which can facilitate the effective implementation of inclusive practices. This includes ensuring that teachers have access to adequate training, mentorship, and collaborative opportunities with special education professionals. Ultimately, the authors argue that fostering a culture of inclusion requires a concerted effort from policymakers to create an environment where teachers feel equipped and supported to embrace inclusive education fully.

Finally, Guillemot and colleagues (2022) conducted a meta-analysis study aiming to investigate teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in the period between 2000 and 2020, including a total of 131 studies. The results indicate that, in general, teachers have a positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings. In particular, a significant improvement in these attitudes was observed from 2000 to 2020, in line with broader changes in society regarding the concept of inclusive education. Another relevant aspect that emerged from the results is the variability of attitudes depending on the measurement scales used. Some questionnaires produced more positive results than others, highlighting the need to adopt standardized and validated scales in future research. Interestingly, the analysis didn't reveal any significant effects of variables such as gender, age, or the status of teacher trainees (pre-service) or already in-service on attitudes towards inclusive education. Understanding the reasons behind teachers' positive or negative attitudes towards inclusion is essential in developing support interventions that make them more prepared and effective in inclusive education.

2.2 Inclusive education within an Italian context

In Italy, while there has long been a commitment to including students with disabilities in mainstream education (Aiello & Pace, 2020), obstacles remain in fully aligning with international standards for

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inclusive practices. Studies point to the need for system-wide reforms to bring Italian schools closer to these standards, advocating for innovative strategies that can better support diverse learners (Marsili *et al.*, 2021). The perspectives of both mainstream and special education teachers in Italy are crucial to advancing successful inclusion, as their attitudes significantly shape the educational experiences of students with disabilities (Arcangeli *et al.*, 2020).

Since the 1970s, Italy has adopted a model of integration of students with disabilities in ordinary classes, under Law 517/1977. In this context, support teachers are called to collaborate with class teachers to ensure inclusive teaching. Law 104/1992, which recognizes the rights of people with disabilities, establishes that special education teachers not only support students with disabilities, but also participate in the planning and implementation of educational and evaluation activities for all students in the class. Ministerial Decree no. 5669 of 12 July 2011 emphasizes the importance of effective integration of students with SEN, promoting access to quality education for all students, regardless of their difficulties. Law 107/2015, the "Buona Scuola", further modernized the Italian education system, aiming to create an inclusive school environment through the hiring of new teachers and the introduction of teaching innovations. Legislative Decree 66/2017 consolidated school inclusion, promoting the adoption of Individualized Educational Plans (PEI) for students with BES and strengthening staff training. Subsequently, Legislative Decree 96/2019 refined the inclusive approach, focusing on the accessibility and flexibility of pedagogical practices, to better respond to the specific needs of students.

In recent years, global research has focused on understanding how teachers perceive inclusion in schools, and how these perceptions can positively or negatively influence the academic success and well-being of students (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014). In the literature, several attitude assessment tools have been proposed, but not all of them demonstrate high reliability and psychometric validity. The study conducted by Ewing and colleagues (2018), which analysed nine questionnaires used to measure teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, highlighted that the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education-Revised (SACIE-R) Scale (Forlin, Earle, Loreman & Sharma, 2011) has adequate psychometric properties for the assessment of affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions, i.e. the key components that determine teachers' attitudes, as demonstrated by the study by Murdaca et al. (2018). This tool allows us to obtain a more complete and accurate view of teachers' predispositions towards inclusion, thus facilitating the identification of specific areas of intervention and training to improve their skills and availability towards inclusive education. The scale has been validated in a variety of contexts, including pre-service teachers from India, Hong Kong, United States and Canada (Forlin *et al.*, 2011a). Importantly, the scale has also been previously used and validated within an Italian context (Fiorucci, 2019; Murdaca *et al.*, 2018).

In examining pre- and in-service special education teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education, this paper adopts a Critical Disability Studies (CDS) lens to explore the potential structural barriers that impact the implementation of inclusive practices in classrooms. Rather than viewing disability as an individual limitation, CDS shifts the focus to the societal and institutional contexts that shape disabled students' experiences (Campbell, 2010; Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The present study's focus on teachers' attitudes toward inclusive practices aligns with CDS by highlighting the role of the special education teacher not only for their practical skillset but also for their perspectives and biases towards inclusive education. CDS supports the notion that systems must accommodate the needs of diverse learners, and teachers as central figures within the classroom play an active role in the move away from the stigmatising or "othering" of diverse learners

(Barnes, 1992; Manchanda, 2024; Reutlinger, 2015; Saltaga, 2017). Thus, understanding the perspectives of special education teachers is imperative.

Results from the present study can help guide teacher training programmes that aim to equip educators with the skills needed to create responsible, inclusive learning environments. Our results are particularly pertinent as the sample encompasses both pre- and in-service teachers, thus including perspectives from a wide range of experience levels. By focusing on a diverse group of teachers, the research offers valuable insights into the factors that influence inclusive practices within Italian classrooms. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the current barriers to inclusivity and highlight the areas in which Italian education might evolve to create more supportive environments for all learners.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are there relationships between teachers' knowledge of legislation and policy, self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities, and years of experience, and their sentiments, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education?
- Does teaching experience with students with disabilities correlate significantly with teachers' attitudes, sentiments, or concerns about inclusive education?
- Which factors most significantly predict teachers' overall sentiments, attitudes and concerns towards inclusive education, as measured by the SACIE-R?

4. METHODOLOGY[2]

4.1 Research design

This study employed a questionnaire-based methodology with quantitative data collected online via Google Forms over approximately two months. The exploratory research design utilised Spearman's Rho correlational analysis as well as multiple regression analysis in order to gain clear insights into the predictors of attitudes and sentiments of special needs teachers towards inclusive education.

4.2 Sample

For the recruitment of participants, we employed a convenience, non-random sampling method, gathering data from students enrolled in the Specialization course for Special Education Activities at the University of Palermo. Participation was voluntary, and consent was gained to process the results. Of the total sample of 1722 participants, ages ranged between 22 to 63 years (M = 40, SD = 8.8), and the sample was mostly female (85.4%). As mentioned, this sample was comprised of both pre-service and in-service teachers with diverse levels of experience in teaching students with disabilities. Of the participants, 24% reported never having taught students with disabilities, 14% had less than 1 year of experience, 20% had 1-2 years, 24% had 3-5 years, and 18% had more than 5 years of experience.

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[2] Some of the SACIE-R descriptive statistics and participant information reported in this paper have been previously published in our separate study focusing on a correlation between the SACIE-R and a separate instrument. The current paper provides a distinct regression analysis centred on only the SACIE-R and predictor variables. The separate study is available in Gülbay, E., Falzone, Y., & Mercer, S. (2024) Inclusive Education in the Digital Era: Special Education Teachers' Perspectives on Technology Integration and Inclusive Practices ISSN: 2188-1162 The European Conference on Education 2024: Official Conference Proceedings (pp. 941-955) https://doi.org/10.22492/issn.2188-1162.2024.73

4.3 Instrument

We employed Forlin et al.'s Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education-Revised (SACIE-R) scale (2011) to assess the special education teachers' views on disability and inclusive education. This 15-item scale is organized into three subscales—sentiments, attitudes, and concerns—each rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree). Scores for the overall scale and each subscale were calculated by averaging responses, with higher scores indicating overall more positive orientations towards inclusive education. The Sentiments subscale explores personal feelings toward individuals with disabilities, captured by items like "I dread the thought that I could eventually end up with a disability" and "I am afraid to look directly at a person with a disability". The Attitudes subscale evaluates broader beliefs about the inclusion of students with disabilities, including items like "Students who have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally should be in regular classes" and "Students who need an individualized academic program should be in regular classes". The Concerns subscale assesses worries related to the inclusion of disabled students regarding things like resource management and feasibility of implementation of inclusive practices, with items such as "I am concerned that it will be difficult to give appropriate attention to all students in an inclusive classroom" and "I am concerned that I will be more stressed if I have students with disabilities in my class".

The authors of the scale also include suggestions for pre-questions, of which we utilised three items: legislation and policy knowledge relating to students with disabilities, level of confidence in teaching students with disabilities, and level of experience teaching students with disabilities, measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The SACIE-R scale has strong psychometric properties and was previously validated with 542 pre-service teachers from diverse countries, reporting internal consistency coefficients of $\alpha = .75$ for the total scale, $\alpha = .75$ for sentiments, $\alpha = .67$ for attitudes, and $\alpha = .65$ for concerns (Forlin et al., 2011a). Within our study we also reported strong internal consistency; Figure 1 presents the descriptive mean, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha values for the total and subscale SACIE-R scores. Permission for use as well as the Italian version of the SACIE-R scale was kindly provided by the original authors.

Dimension	No. Of Items	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum*	Maximum	Cronbach's alpha
Sentiments	5	1723	3.49	0.472	1.00	4.00	0.725
Attitudes	5	1723	3.64	0.454	1.00	4.00	0.820
Concerns	5	1723	3.29	0.499	1.00	4.00	0.736
Total scale	15	1723	3.47	0.365	1.87	4.00	0.834

* Theoretical minimum and maximum values for all domains and the total scale are 1 and 4.

Figure 1: SACIE-R Descriptives

4.4 Data analysis

Statistical data analysis was managed using Jamovi 2.2.5. The relationships between variables were first measured through correlation analysis, followed by further exploration through multiple regression analysis to investigate the predictive factors of the dependent variable; SACIE-R total scores. Following data collection, the raw data was cleaned, inclusive of handling any missing data

and reverse scoring negatively coded items in the SACIE-R. Assumption checks for correlation and regression analyses were carried out.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether relationships existed between the variables. We performed Spearman's correlation between legislation and policy knowledge, self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities, and years of experience teaching students with disabilities against each subscale of the SACIE-R (sentiments, attitudes, and concerns) and the total SACIE-R scores as calculated by means. Spearman's rho was used due to the inherent nature of Likert data. The full correlation matrix output is displayed in Figure 2. The results showed significant ($p < .001$) positive relationships between all three variables and the subscales as well as the total SACIE-R scores, with the only exceptions being years of experience teaching students with disabilities, which showed no significant correlation with the sentiments and attitudes subscales of inclusive education. Legislation and policy knowledge demonstrated small relationships with the sentiments ($r = .15$, $p < .001$), attitudes ($r = .23$, p < .001) and concerns ($r = .20$, $p < .001$) subscales, as well as with the total SACIE-R ($r = .25$, $p < .001$) scale. Similarly, self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities showed small relationships with the sentiments ($r = .18$, $p < .001$), attitudes ($r = .18$, $p < .001$) and concerns ($r = .30$, $p < .001$) subscales, as well as with the total SACIE-R ($r = .28$, $p < .001$) scale. However, whilst years of experience teaching students with disabilities demonstrated a small significant correlation with the concerns ($r = .13$, $p < .001$) subscale, it had smaller, non-significant results with the sentiments ($r = .03$, $p = .153$) and attitudes ($r = .01$, $p = .602$) subscales, as well as a smaller, less significant correlation with the total SACIE-R ($r = .08$, $p = .001$) scale.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Leg./policy knowledge	Spearman's rho	—						
	df	—						
	p-value	—						
2.Self Confidence	Spearman's rho	0.442	—					
	df	1720	—					
	p-value	<.001	—					
3.Years experience	Spearman's rho	0.114	0.296	—				
	df	1721	1720	—				
	p-value	<.001	<.001	—				
4. Sentiments	Spearman's rho	0.154	0.177	0.034	—			
	df	1721	1720	1721	—			

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		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	p-value	<.001	<.001	0.153	—			
5. Concerns	Spearman's rho	0.204	0.297	0.125	0.602	—		
	df	1721	1720	1721	1721	—		
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—		
6. Attitudes	Spearman's rho	0.226	0.178	0.013	0.284	0.289	—	
	df	1721	1720	1721	1721	1721	—	
	p-value	<.001	<.001	0.602	<.001	<.001	—	
7.Total SACIE-R	Spearman's rho	0.246	0.284	0.078	0.801	0.830	0.635	—
	df	1721	1720	1721	1721	1721	1721	—
	p-value	<.001	<.001	0.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—

Figure 2: Correlation Matrix Output 1

5.2 Regression analysis

Multiple linear regression was then utilised with the two factors which demonstrated significant relationships with SACIE-R scores (legislation and policy knowledge and self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities) to assess how well they predicted the dependent variable (perspectives towards inclusive education, measured by the total SACIE-R mean score).

Before conducting the multiple regression analysis, various assumption checks were carried out to affirm the integrity of the results. The reported correlation coefficients between the two covariates and the dependent variable suggested the existence of linearity, along with confirmation from visual inspection of the scatterplots of each predictor against the dependent variable. Homoscedasticity was assessed by examining the residuals vs. fitted values plot, which showed a relatively even scatter of dots around zero with no discernible pattern or funnelling, suggesting that this assumption was reasonably met. Normality of the residuals was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and Q-Q plots, both of which suggested deviations from normality ($p < .001$). Whilst this violation of normality could suggest that results must be treated with caution, it can be argued that the large sample size ($N = 1722$) offers robustness to the model despite the assumption breach, as within statistical methodology literature it is proposed that among large sample sizes, the normality assumption is often unnecessary (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012; Knief & Forstmeier, 2021; Schmidt & Finan, 2018). The Durbin-Watson statistic indicated no significant autocorrelation (DW = 1.98, $p < .756$), thus satisfying the assumption. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance verified there were no multicollinearity or singularity concerns within the predictor variables, with VIF values below 1.5, and Tolerance values above .7.

The overall fit of the model was significant, with an *F*-statistic of 74.6 and *p*-value of $< .001$ [$F(2,1719) = 74.6$, $p < .001$], indicating that the combination of the predictors together significantly contribute to explaining the percentage of variability in teachers' sentiments, attitudes and concerns

regarding inclusive education. The model explains 8% of the variance in SACIE-R scores, with an adjusted R^2 value of 0.08. Full model fit output can be found in Figure 3.

| Model | R | R² | Adjusted R² | Overall Model Test | | | |
				F	df1	df2	p
1	0.283	0.0799	0.0788	74.6	2	1719	<.001

Note. Models estimated using sample size of *N*=1722

Figure 3: Model Fit Measures Output

Both legislation and policy knowledge (*t* (1719) = 5.48, *p* < .001, 95% CI 0.05 to 0.11) and self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities (*t* (1719) = 7.31, *p* < .001, 95% CI 0.01 to 0.08) could significantly predict SACIE-R scores. Overall, self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities was a slightly better predictor of SACIE-R scores (® = 0.19, *p* < .001) than legislation and policy knowledge (® = 0.14, *p* < .001). Full model coefficients output can be found in Figure 4.

| Predictor | Estimate | SE | 95% Confidence Interval | | t | p | Stand. Estimate |
			Lower	Upper			
Intercept	2.7673	0.0586	2.6524	2.882	47.24	<.001	
Legislation and Policy Knowledge	0.0811	0.0148	0.0521	0.110	5.48	<.001	0.142
Self Confidence Teaching Students with Disabilities	0.1061	0.0145	0.0776	0.135	7.31	<.001	0.189

Figure 4: Model Coefficients Output

6. DISCUSSION

The present study offered nuanced insights into the teachers' sentiments, attitudes, and concerns regarding inclusive education, and how these are related to their experience teaching students with disabilities, legislation and policy knowledge, and self-confidence levels of teaching students with disabilities.

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6.1 Legislation and policy knowledge

The correlation analysis showed that legislation and policy knowledge were positively associated with the total SACIE-R scale, and the individual subscales. Although the correlations were modest, they were significant, with the strongest association observed with the attitudes subscale, suggesting that teachers who are knowledgeable about legislative inclusive policies tend to have more positive beliefs and perspectives surrounding inclusive education. The regression analysis further highlighted the importance of policy knowledge as a predictor of overall SACIE-R scores. This relationship could be due to the clarity and structure that policy knowledge provides, assisting teachers in feeling more grounded in their approach to inclusion. However, the relatively modest effect size indicates that policy knowledge alone is insufficient for substantial attitudinal shifts; it may need to be supported by other factors to maximize its impact. These findings underscore the importance of promoting knowledge of inclusive legislation and policies as part of professional development for teachers. By ensuring that teachers are familiar with the principles and frameworks guiding inclusive education, training programmes may help nurture more positive attitudes toward inclusion, though this effect may be amplified when combined with other supportive factors.

6.2 Self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities

Self-confidence in teaching students with disabilities also yielded significant positive correlations with each SACIE-R subscale and the total score. Among these, the strongest correlation was with the concerns subscale, suggesting that teachers with higher self-confidence experience fewer reservations or doubts about inclusive education. The positive association with the total SACIE-R score was also one of the strongest correlations in the study, indicating further that self-confidence plays a central role in fostering positive attitudes toward inclusion. The regression analysis confirmed that self-confidence was the strongest predictor among the variables studied, with the highest standardized coefficient. This finding suggests that in this context self-confidence not only correlated with, but also contributed the most to, teachers' overall attitudes toward inclusive education. Self-confidence emerging as particularly important in alleviating concerns about managing inclusive classrooms could perhaps be because confident teachers feel more capable of adapting their teaching strategies to meet diverse needs. These results portray the value of instilling self-confidence within teachers as an important approach not only for the well-being of the teachers themselves but for improved attitudes towards inclusion, thus more positive outcomes for students.

6.3 Years of experience teaching students with disabilities

In contrast to the other predictors, years of experience teaching students with disabilities demonstrated limited associations with attitudes toward inclusion. The correlation analysis revealed only a small, significant correlation with the concerns subscale, indicating that greater experience may slightly reduce teachers' concerns about inclusion. However, level of experience showed no significant correlation with the sentiments or attitudes subscales and had only a small, less significant correlation with the total SACIE-R score. This suggests that contrary to previously reported findings (Yang & Yu, 2021), experience teaching students with disabilities does not necessarily enhance positive sentiments or beliefs about inclusivity. From this, it can be proposed that merely accumulating experience in teaching students with disabilities does not necessarily lead to more

favourable attitudes or reduced concerns about inclusion, and rather other factors such as self-confidence and policy knowledge play a larger role. Without specific training or structured reflection on inclusive practices, years of experience may not translate into improved attitudes toward inclusion. For experienced teachers, professional development focused on inclusive best practices and policy knowledge may still be necessary to cultivate more positive attitudes and respond to the demands of modern-day inclusive classrooms, particularly in those who might not have had formal training in inclusive education earlier in their careers.

Overall, these results suggest that promoting positive attitudes and sentiments toward inclusive education requires more than just experience. Teacher training and tailored professional development programmes that focus not only on knowledge and teaching-hours acquisition but also on increasing teachers' beliefs in their abilities can better support teachers in creating inclusive educational environments that benefit all students. Schools and policymakers should consider incorporating policy education and self-efficacy training into professional development programs to support teachers in adopting more positive, inclusive mindsets.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the importance of policy knowledge and self-confidence in shaping teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. Through correlation and regression analyses, we found that while direct experience teaching students with disabilities has minimal impact on reducing reservations, it is the combination of self-confidence and legislation and policy knowledge that significantly influences positive attitudes toward inclusion. These findings can guide teacher training programmes in shifting the focus from solely providing hours of experience, to fostering self-confidence and policy understanding to encourage a more inclusive mindset among educators. Though the study benefits from a large sample size, it is limited by potential unmeasured variables that could also affect attitudes toward inclusion. Future research could investigate additional variables and examine how different types of teaching experience or training approaches influence attitudes, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how to foster inclusive education practices. Also, continuing research on this topic in diverse contexts and across different countries is essential to fully understand how various cultural, policy, and educational frameworks shape attitudes toward inclusion.

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