

Primary School Teachers' Attitudes, Perceptions and Self-Efficacy Regarding Students With Special Educational Needs: A Comparative Study of the Education Systems in Slovenia and Kosovo

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≈ The purpose of this paper is to explore teachers' attitudes, perceptions and self-efficacy regarding students with special educational needs in Slovenia and Kosovo, as well as to identify the similarities and differences between the two education systems in terms of inclusive practices. Quantitative data were collected from a sample of teachers working in grades 1–5 of primary schools in Slovenia ($n = 258$) and Kosovo ($n = 255$). The data were gathered using the Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education scale and the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practice scale and analysed using SPSS version 21.0. The findings indicate higher means of samples in both Slovenia and Kosovo in negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education, while statistically significant differences were identified in attitudes and other factors, such as age, gender or teaching experience with students with special educational needs. Teachers in Slovenia and Kosovo scored higher in self-efficacy, which is negatively correlated at a significant level with sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education.

Keywords: teachers' sentiments, attitudes, perceptions, self-efficacy, inclusive education, students with special educational needs

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Stališča, zaznave in samoučinkovitost osnovnošolskih učiteljev glede učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami: primerjalna študija izobraževalnih sistemov v Sloveniji in na Kosovu

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~~~~~ Namen prispevka je raziskati stališča, zaznave in samoučinkovitost učiteljev glede učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami v Sloveniji in na Kosovu ter ugotoviti podobnosti in razlike med obema izobraževalnima sistemoma v smislu praks inkluzije. Kvantitativni podatki so bili zbrani na vzorcu učiteljev, ki delajo v 1.-5. razredu osnovnih šol v Sloveniji ( $n = 258$ ) in na Kosovu ( $n = 255$ ). Podatki so bili zbrani s pomočjo lestvice o občutkih, stališčih in o pomislekih glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja (Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale) ter lestvice o učinkovitosti učiteljev za prakse inkluzije (Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practice Scale) ter analizirani s programom SPSS različice 21.0. Ugotovitve kažejo na višja povprečja vzorcev v Sloveniji in na Kosovu pri negativnih občutkih, stališčih in pomislekih glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja, statistično pomembne razlike pa so bile ugotovljene pri stališčih in drugih dejavnikih, kot so starost, spol ali izkušnje s poučevanjem učencev s posebnimi učnimi potrebami. Učitelji v Sloveniji in na Kosovu so dosegli višje rezultate pri samoučinkovitosti, ki je negativno povezana z občutki, s stališči in z zaznavami glede inkluzivnega izobraževanja, povezanost pa je statistično značilna.

**Ključne besede:** občutki učiteljev, stališča, zaznave, samoučinkovitost, inkluzivno izobraževanje, učenci s posebnimi učnimi potrebami

## Introduction

### Inclusive education reforms globally

Over the last decades, inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) has increased significantly in mainstream schools. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002, p. 131), this trend is seen “as part of a broad human rights agenda”. The development is reflected in numerous international documents, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and the Framework for the Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007). These documents clearly recognise that all children must have their fundamental rights and aims met in order to guarantee quality education for all and to provide the necessary comprehensive support to develop the potential of each child. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO, 2005, p. 13), inclusive education can be defined as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”. Education system reform, particularly the transformation from traditional to inclusive schools, cannot be achieved without shifting the focus from segregation to integration and access of all children to education processes. Prior to defining inclusive education, UNESCO (1994) outlined the crucial aspects of inclusive schools as follows:

Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. (p. 12)

Such developments have led to significant reforms in education systems worldwide. Despite the political consensus on the need to embrace a comprehensive global agenda on inclusive education, Šuc et al. (2017) have argued that “significant differences seem to exist between countries, often related to cultural, historical, and legal differences between different environments” (p. 938). Even well-developed countries that promote inclusive education are still struggling to advance inclusive education practices. “Efforts to create more inclusive communities are fraught with multiple difficulties, dilemmas, and contradictions that often result in piecemeal or sequential reforms” (Vlachou, 2004, p. 3).

## Teachers' attitudes and perceptions

Regardless of the local context and the differences between countries, the role of the teacher is indicated as an important factor in the success of inclusive education policies and practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Yada et al., 2018; Dulčić & Bakota, 2008; De Boer et al., 2011). In several studies, teachers' attitudes are therefore a crucial factor in the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (Schmidt, 2011; Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Kemp & Carter, 2009; Dulčić & Bakota, 2008; De Boer et al., 2011). In a qualitative study of the understanding and attitudes of Kosovo teachers regarding inclusive education, Zabeli et al. (2021) found that teachers perceive the achievement of children with SEN in regular classrooms only in terms of socialisation and social acceptance, and not in terms of academic achievement. Moreover, recent studies have found that many teachers have less than positive attitudes towards students with SEN and their inclusion in mainstream education classrooms (Dupoux et al., 2005; Loreman et al., 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009) and that teachers' negative attitudes have a detrimental effect on teaching practice in the classroom (Gal et al., 2010). Negative attitudes of teachers impact the academic performance of students with SEN and are correlated with low expectations of such students with regard to school achievement (Wilczenski, 1993). On the other hand, positive attitudes allow and encourage inclusive practices that guarantee the success of inclusion (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). According to Agbenyega (2007), positive attitudes towards inclusive education are correlated with a lower degree of concern about such education. In addition, Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) found that a positive attitude is closely linked with high-quality, well-planned, and long-term training. Positive attitudes of teachers regarding the inclusion of children with SEN also feature in studies by Campbell et al. (2003) and Forlin (2010), who emphasise that such attitudes are positively linked to the implementation of different teaching strategies by teachers that enable them to embrace individual differences (Forlin et al., 2011).

Research has acknowledged factors that can have an impact on teachers' attitudes, such as gender, age, experiences of and contacts with students with SEN, level of education, training, distribution of resources, sources of support, colleagues' administrative support, organisational framework and class size (Forlin, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Another factor that influences teachers' perceptions of children with SEN is the individual's belief of how confident and competent s/he is to work with diverse learners. Various studies have highlighted the fact that the positive attitude of teachers is impacted by their self-perception, which involves the level of information they have received and

their awareness of the capacities and development of children with SEN (Avramidis et al., 2000; Schmidt & Čagran, 2011; MacFarlane & Woolfson Marks, 2013; Kranjčan, 2015). In this regard, teacher education is viewed as a decisive component in developing the affirmative attitudes and competences required for successful implementation. Providing relevant teacher training should therefore be a priority for policymakers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). On the other hand, the level of inclusion of children with SEN depends on the amount of prior contact that education professionals have had with persons with disabilities during their lifetime, whether as family members or in a friendship (Gething et al., 1997; Subban & Sharma, 2006).

According to Linton et al. (2015), teachers who have had previous experience with children or adults with disabilities have more social representation elements than their counterparts without any such experience. These results highlight the role of contextual factors and prior experience in shaping teachers' attitudes. When considering the influence of age, gender and role on inclusive attitudes, research has shown mixed results (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Vaz et al., 2015). Some researchers have noted that female teachers have a greater level of tolerance towards the inclusion of children with SEN, while other studies have reported no effect of gender (Ellins & Porter, 2005). With regard to age, younger teachers and those with fewer years of work experience have been found to have more positive attitudes (Berryman, 1989; Center & Ward, 1987; Clough & Lindsay, 1991). According to a study by Forlin (1995), teachers with less experience are reported to be more supportive of the inclusion of children with SEN than those with more work experience. However, the most significant factors affecting attitudes towards the inclusion of SEN students remain the type and severity of the disability (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Moberg & Savolainen, 2003). According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), students with physical or sensory impairments are accepted more readily than students with learning difficulties and emotional-behavioural difficulties.

### **Teachers' self-efficacy and sources**

Jordan et al. (2009) highlighted the fact that "effective inclusionary practices have been found to depend to a noticeable extent on the sentiments of teachers about the nature of disability and their perceived roles in supporting students with special needs" (as cited by Forlin et al., 2011, p. 51). Savolainen et al. (2012) found a positive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their attitude towards inclusive education, indicating that teachers with a higher

level of self-efficacy are more open to embracing inclusive education practices. However, Savolainen et al. (2012) also found that, among three sub-dimensions of self-efficacy, efficacy in collaboration had the strongest positive relationship with attitudes towards inclusion compared to efficacy in managing behaviour and using inclusive instructions, which implies that teachers need support in implementing inclusion practices.

According to Bandura (1997), "teachers with a high sense of instructional efficacy operate on the belief that difficult students are teachable through extra effort and appropriate techniques and that they can enlist family supports and overcome negating community influences through effective teaching" (p. 240). Moreover, evidence shows that the teacher's self-efficacy is associated with the student's motivation, increased self-esteem, strong self-direction, ease in managing school transition and more positive attitudes towards school (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Pajares, 2003; Hofman & Kilimo, 2014). According to Hofman and Kilimo (2014, p. 181), a study by Ross et al. from 2001 found that "teacher's self-efficacy may also contribute to promote student's own sense of efficacy, foster their involvement in class activities and their efforts in facing difficulties in their educational career".

### **Rationale for choosing the sample countries**

The present study aims to research teachers' attitudes, perceptions and self-efficacy regarding inclusive practices in two diverse countries in terms of overall developments in the field of education: Slovenia and Kosovo. Despite the fact that the Republic of Slovenia is among 92 signatory countries to the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994), the importance of inclusion was more widely recognised by the White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (1995), which formed the foundation for reforms fostering the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2023). Complementarily, the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011) introduced a new legislative dimension and policy framework for the inclusion of children with SEN. The term 'Children with Special Educational Needs' refers to all children who need extra support and adjustments. According to this Act, all children – including children with SEN – have "the right to education and equal participation in everyday life", while also emphasising that education should be free of charge.

The decision regarding the placement of children with SEN – whether they should be enrolled in a mainstream school or placed in an adapted or

special programme – and the type of educational support is determined by the Committee for Directing Children with Special Needs (Opara, 2005) and the Stage of Disabilities (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2003). In this regard, several types of educational programme are provided at the preschool and primary school level.

Despite the provision of legal grounds for the implementation of inclusive education, there is still a big gap between legislation and practice (Kavkler et al., 2015). Slovenian legislation maintains a dual education system, whereby students are either educated separately from their peers in special institutions or attend regular schools together with their peers (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2015), but the number of children with SEN included in regular schools has gradually increased every year. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2024), there were 19,418 children with SEN in regular and adapted basic education programmes in the 2023/2024 school year, representing 10% of all children in basic school. Most of them (85%) were included in regular programmes with adapted implementation and additional professional assistance, representing 8% of all pupils in regular basic education programmes (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024). However, the paradigm shift from segregation to inclusion has raised the question of whether teachers are sufficiently qualified and confident to teach students with SEN in their classes. Recent studies on inclusive education show that the vast majority of Slovenian teachers face numerous barriers to the implementation of inclusive practices, such as inadequate teacher qualifications, lack of training or inappropriate training and insufficient support from the special education sector, as well as barriers related to the general societal resistance to change (Mitchell, 2015).

In Kosovo, inclusive education policy was introduced within the legislative framework only in 2011, in the form of the Law on Pre-University Education. 'Inclusion' as a concept permeates the whole law, which is based on the Salamanca Statement on inclusion and the European Convention on Human Rights. Since then, numerous reforms at all levels of education have led to changes in the education system regarding the education of children with SEN. Apart from mainstreaming, there have also been processes of the transformation of traditional schools to inclusive schools, while special schools have been converted into resource centres. It is therefore considered that all children, including those with SEN, should be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools.

However, many children with SEN are still not in school, or their specific needs and rights are not taken into account in their schooling. According to a report by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2015), only 33.4% of children with disabilities were enrolled in pre-university education in

Kosovo in the 2011/2012 academic year, although institutions emphasise that the percentage has been gradually increasing in recent years. Considering these statistics and Kosovo educational contexts, it can be concluded that there is a limited understanding within communities and among teachers about the learning needs of students with SEN, which is often fuelled by prejudices surrounding disability. In an effort to analyse the factors behind the decreasing rate of inclusion of students with SEN in educational settings, the present study is based on the assumption that teachers' attitudes and perceptions have an impact on the low performance or poor academic achievement of students with SEN, as well as on their ability to comprehend the curricula and follow the teacher's instructions. It is therefore necessary to examine the attitudes and perceptions of teachers regarding students with special educational needs in order to identify deficiencies within the education system.

### **Research problem and research questions**

Ultimately, the aim of the present study is to explore similarities and differences in inclusive education policies and practices regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in primary schools (grades 1–5) in Slovenia and Kosovo through a representative sample of approximately 500 respondents.

The following research questions guided the research work:

1. What are teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs in primary schools?
2. What are the factors influencing teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding students with special educational needs?
3. How does self-efficacy for inclusive practices influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The Kosovo sample was drawn from the largest and most diverse municipalities in Kosovo, representing three different regions. The sample comprised 255 primary school teachers of grades 1–5. Due to difficulties collecting the sample related to the Covid-19 pandemic, structured random sampling could not be used; however, the respondents do represent a diverse sample of Kosovo teachers in terms of the type of location (rural and urban) as well as the type of school (inclusive and traditional). The majority of the Kosovo respondents

were reached with the help of a small number of teachers who were interested in the results of the study and therefore facilitated the data collection process within their respective educational institutions.

The data related to the Slovenian sample were collected in a much broader geographical area, representing 35 municipalities. This distribution was not initially planned, but was necessary due to the low response rate. The participating teachers are from regular schools (grades 1–5), as attached (special) classes are not organised anymore following the transformation of the Slovenian education system into a regular system. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Slovenian sample of 258 teachers was collected virtually using existing platforms to contact teachers in 69 locations, where the majority of respondents (65.9%) are from schools located in the country's major cities.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the Kosovo (n = 255) and Slovenian (n = 258) sample*

|                                                         |                                 | Kosovo | Slovenia |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------|----------|
| Gender (% female)                                       |                                 | 88.5   | 88.4     |
| Age (%)                                                 | 25 years or less                | 2.4    | 0.8      |
|                                                         | 26–35                           | 21.6   | 18.2     |
|                                                         | 36–45                           | 37.6   | 27.9     |
|                                                         | 46 or more                      | 38.4   | 53.1     |
| Highest level of education (%)                          | BA in education                 | 68.6   | 67.1     |
|                                                         | Master's in education           | 12.2   | 17.8     |
|                                                         | Pedagogical High School         | 5.5    | 1.6      |
|                                                         | Master's in Inclusive Education | 0.0    | 0.0      |
|                                                         | Master's (Other)                | 2.0    | 5.4      |
|                                                         | Other education                 | 0.0    | 0.0      |
|                                                         |                                 | 9.4    | 8.1      |
|                                                         |                                 | 2.4    | 0.0      |
| Teaching years (%)                                      | 0–2                             | 4.0    | 5.0      |
|                                                         | 3–5                             | 9.5    | 11.2     |
|                                                         | 6–10                            | 14.2   | 9.3      |
|                                                         | 11–15                           | 21.3   | 8.9      |
|                                                         | 16–20                           | 19.0   | 14.3     |
|                                                         | 21+                             | 32.0   | 51.2     |
| Type of setting                                         | Rural                           | 80.8   | 64.0     |
|                                                         | Urban                           | 19.2   | 36.0     |
| Interaction with persons with disabilities              | Zero                            | 18.2   | 1.2      |
|                                                         | Little                          | 59.3   | 66.3     |
|                                                         | High                            | 22.5   | 32.6     |
| Knowledge about local legislation/policies on inclusion | None                            | 4.7    | 1.2      |
|                                                         | Poor                            | 15.4   | 20.2     |
|                                                         | Medium                          | 43.5   | 46.9     |
|                                                         | Good                            | 28.5   | 25.6     |
|                                                         | Very good                       | 7.9    | 6.2      |
| Amount of inclusive education training                  | None                            | 18.2   | 19.4     |
|                                                         | Little                          | 59.3   | 60.5     |
|                                                         | High                            | 22.5   | 20.2     |

The data in Table 1 show that the total number of participants was 513 ( $n = 258$  in Slovenia and  $n = 255$  in Kosovo). Based on the most recent country data, the total number of teaching staff in Slovenia is 25,304, including basic education and upper secondary school (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024). In Kosovo, there were 22,067 teachers in primary and upper secondary education in the 2023/2024 school year (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2024). The percentage of female teachers is similar and very high in both countries (88.4– 88.5%). This is explained by the disproportionate numbers of male and female teachers working in primary/basic and upper secondary education in both countries: 13,661 women in Kosovo as opposed to 3,340 men, while in Slovenia there are 20,604 women employed compared to 4,231 men. Similarities between teachers in both countries are also identified regarding the level of education, with the vast majority of teachers in both countries (67–68%) reporting having completed a bachelor's (BA) degree. In terms of teaching experience, the largest group of surveyed teachers in both Slovenia and Kosovo declared having more than 21 years of experience, but this accounted for 51.2% of the Slovenian teachers compared to only 32.0% of the teachers in Kosovo.

## Instruments

The questionnaire begins with a cover letter explaining the aim of the study and confidentiality. The first section requests demographic data, while the two other sections represent two standardised instruments. The six categories of students referred to in the demographic data for research purposes include only those with developmental disabilities that begin in childhood (before the age of 18), are life-long and significantly affect intellectual capacity and/or adaptive skills. The Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale (Malinen et al., 2012; Savolainen et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2012) was used to measure the perceived teacher efficacy to teach in inclusive classrooms. According to Malinen et al. (2012), the scale consists of 18 items that are rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 – 'strongly disagree' to 6 – 'strongly agree', whereby higher scores indicate higher teacher self-efficacy. The TEIP scale can be divided into three subscales measuring efficacy in instruction, efficacy in managing behaviour and efficacy in collaboration.

Teachers' perceptions regarding inclusive education are measured using the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R) scale. According to Forlin et al. (2011), the scale is developed to measure teachers' perceptions "in three constructs of inclusive education,

namely, sentiments or comfort levels when engaging with people with disabilities; acceptance of learners with different needs; and concerns about implementing inclusion" (p. 50). The SACIE-R is a 15-item scale rated on a 4-point Likert-scale from 1 – 'strongly disagree' to 4 – 'strongly agree', whereby the highest score indicates *higher negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns* about inclusive education.

In both countries, the TEIP scale scores had a high alpha reliability coefficient, with 0.946 in Kosovo and 0.670 in Slovenia.

#### *Translation of the questionnaires*

The TEIP and SACIE scales are originally written in English. Two different translation processes were used to translate the scales into Albanian and Slovenian and adapt them for the respective samples. Both instruments were translated into Albanian and Slovenian by independent translators and researchers in the field and then back-translated to verify the translations. This was followed by the adaptation of the instruments, which were crosschecked with the original English versions. The adaptation process for the Slovenian version was carried out by a university professor, while a specialised civil society researcher adapted the Albanian version. Some items were slightly revised to adapt them as much as possible to the respective contexts. The items seeking demographic data were written by the author in English, translated into Albanian and Slovenian and then back-translated to verify the translations.

#### **Research design**

The study relies on quantitative data obtained through a survey that was administered in-person or virtually. The data collection process was initially foreseen to begin early in 2020, but was significantly delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, lockdown and prevention measures taken by both countries throughout the following three-year period 2020–2022. Therefore, the data collection process took place in various periods, respecting the measures and the preferred response method by educational institutions and teachers. The Kosovo sample participants preferred the responses to be collected in-person with the support of a few teachers in each region/municipality who were interested in the results, while the Slovenian sample was collected entirely via virtual channels (Google form) after contacting the schools individually. Due to the global situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, and considering the transformation of educational programmes into virtual programmes, the data collection process was particularly challenging. Both the virtual version and the

hardcopy of the questionnaire began with a statement by the author explaining the purpose and objectives of the study, as well as its ethical principles and anonymity criteria.

### **Data processing and analysis**

The data were processed via the Statistical Package for Social Scientists – SPSS 21.0. The statistical methods used are frequency distribution, basic descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation Coefficient and One-Way ANOVA.

## **Results**

### **Teachers' attitudes and perceptions about the inclusion of students with special educational needs in primary schools in Slovenia and Kosovo**

The results revealed relatively high negative attitudes and perceptions of teachers about inclusion of students with special educational needs in both countries. In the 15-item scale of Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R), teachers in Kosovo self-reported high scores indicating *higher negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns* about inclusive education ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = .34$ ). Similar results were found in the Slovenian sample, where teachers scored highly on negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = .39$ ).

The items with the highest means in both countries were mostly statements identifying the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom as the leading cause for an increase in workload, worry that the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom would affect teachers' attention to all of the students in the class, and the teachers' self-perception that they do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach children with disabilities.

Teachers' negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education are mostly related to their performance and their ability to support all of the children in their classrooms. Consequently, teachers reported slightly lower means, which were nonetheless significant in terms of the inclusion of students who need an individual education plan, students who have difficulties expressing themselves, or students who need communication technology in the classroom (i.e., sign language and Braille). An important factor in this regard is the experience and contact teachers have had throughout their teaching career.

**Table 2***Level of interaction with different categories of children with disabilities*

| Interaction with children with special educational needs                                              | Kosovo | Slovenia |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----------|
| Physical disabilities (% Yes)                                                                         | 23.1   | 35.3     |
| Light intellectual impairments (% Yes)                                                                | 65.9   | 86.0     |
| Deaf and blind (% Yes)                                                                                | 8.2    | 28.3     |
| Chronic Health Impairment (e.g., FASD – Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, muscular dystrophy) (% Yes) | 8.0    | 36.4     |
| Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism, Asperger Syndrome) (% Yes)                                          | 20.4   | 51.9     |
| Multiple impairments (% Yes)                                                                          | 17.3   | 36.0     |

As shown in Table 2, the Slovenian sample showed a significantly higher level of experience in interaction with all six groups of children with disabilities compared to the Kosovo sample. However, interaction with children with light intellectual impairments (learning difficulties) prevailed compared to other categories in both countries, with 65.9% declared in Kosovo and 86.0% in Slovenia. The Slovenian sample of teachers also had a significantly higher level of experience with various categories of disability and a greater variety of problems.

### **Factors influencing teachers' attitudes and perceptions about students with special educational needs**

Teachers' attitudes and perceptions remain one of the most important factors influencing the inclusion of children with disabilities. Both countries showed similar results regarding the means of negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education. However, there are few individual factors that might impact their overall perception in this regard.

**Table 3**

*Result of One-Way ANOVA testing the differences in groups of attitudes with respect to the teacher's age group in Kosovo and Slovenia*

| Groups of variables                                             | Age        | N   | Mean | SD   | Levene test | One-Way ANOVA |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----|------|------|-------------|---------------|
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions score in Slovenian sample | 25 or less | 2   | 2.2  | .094 | .31         | .11           |
|                                                                 | 26-35      | 47  | 2.4  | .28  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 36-45      | 73  | 2.2  | .34  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 46 or more | 136 | 2.3  | .32  |             |               |
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions score in Kosovo sample    | 25 or less | 6   | 2.03 | .29  | .23         | .00           |
|                                                                 | 26-35      | 53  | 2.06 | .41  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 36-45      | 94  | 2.23 | .34  |             |               |
|                                                                 | 46 or more | 97  | 2.32 | .34  |             |               |

The overall mean of the negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions about students with special educational needs in Slovenia and Kosovo is relatively high. However, in terms of *age as a potential influencing factor*, One-Way ANOVA shows a statistically significant difference only in the Kosovo sample, with  $p = .000$ . The age gap between teachers in Kosovo and Slovenia is not of concern, as the majority of teachers in both countries are below the age group of 46 or more.

**Table 4**

*Result of One-Way ANOVA testing the differences in groups of attitudes with respect to the teacher's gender in Kosovo and Slovenia*

| Groups of variables                               | Gender | N   | Mean | SD  | Levene test | One-way ANOVA |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------|-----|------|-----|-------------|---------------|
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in Slovenia | Female | 228 | 2.28 | .32 | .51         | .76           |
|                                                   | Male   | 30  | 2.29 | .32 |             |               |
| Sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in Kosovo   | Female | 221 | 2.22 | .37 | .26         | .88           |
|                                                   | Male   | 29  | 2.23 | .33 |             |               |

The results presented in Table 4 do not show any statistical significance for the gender factor. Considering the vast majority of the respondents (over 85%) in both countries are female, similar findings were expected in the data analysis. Another factor expected to have a significant impact on the negative attitudes and perceptions of teachers of grades 1-5 was the type of disability. The

surveyed teachers provided information about whether they had had contact with students from the six different groups of disabilities in their teaching experience in the last five years. Once again, the ANOVA results do not show any statistically significant difference in the sample of Slovenia regarding their experience with various types of disabilities. However, the results do show slightly different indications for the Kosovo sample. The ANOVA results confirm the existence of a statistically significant difference in sentiments, attitudes and perceptions, and one particular type of disability that the Kosovo sample had had contact with – deaf and blind students – with  $p = .043$ .

### **Self-efficacy for inclusive practices and its impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education**

Teachers' self-efficacy was measured through the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP), where higher scores indicate higher teacher self-efficacy. The samples from both countries showed high means in self-efficacy during descriptive analysis in Slovenia ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) and in Kosovo ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ). Generally, both samples scored highly in both instruments, despite the opposite direction of their sentiments, attitudes and concerns versus self-efficacy. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was therefore performed to elaborate further potential relations between two aspects of teachers' self-reporting data.

There was a significant but negative relationship between teachers' sentiments, attitudes and perceptions in relation to teacher's self-efficacy for the sample in Slovenia,  $r(-14,749) = -.281$ ,  $p = < .000$ . Similar results were drawn from the sample of Kosovo, where the teachers' sentiments, attitudes and perceptions as well as teachers' self-efficacy negatively correlate and the 2-tailed significance value proves that our correlation is significantly high and not just a function of random sampling error,  $r(11,731) = -.163$ ,  $p = < .009$ .

## **Discussion**

The present empirical study initially examined the sentiments, attitudes and perceptions of primary school teachers (grades 1–5) in Slovenia and Kosovo regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs. The aim was to determine the level of negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding inclusive education and the factors affecting them via the SACIE-R: teachers' age, gender, and contact with students with various types of disabilities during their teaching experience.

- The descriptive analysis showed that teachers in both countries scored significantly high means in the SACIE-R, which is designed to collect information on potentially negative sentiments, attitudes and perceptions among teachers regarding SEN students. According to the self-reporting instruments, the majority of the concerns relate to the increase in workload, as well as to teachers' self-perceived inability to dedicate themselves to all of the children in the class, or even whether they are prepared to work with children with disabilities if they are integrated in their classrooms. The teachers therefore did not embrace the idea of including in their classrooms students who were subject to assessment and have an Individual Education Plan, children who cannot express themselves properly, or even those who need communication devices.
- Despite thorough analysis to examine potential influencing factors, the teachers' gender or the type of disability of the students were not found to be significant in either the Slovenian or the Kosovo sample, with the exception of age and only one type of disability (deaf and blind) in the Kosovo sample. Individual influencing factors are a very important factor in embracing inclusive education by teachers of primary and upper secondary school. With regard to gender, it should be noted that women make up the vast majority of the teacher population in both countries, which is also reflected in the sample and may have impacted the results of the study.

The high results regarding self-efficacy drawn by the data collected through the Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) are negatively correlated with results of the SACIE-R. Teachers in both countries perceive themselves as competent to work in their classrooms and deal with various difficulties with students, parents or other parties involved. However, they still reported high levels of negative sentiments, attitudes and concerns, mostly related to the perceived difficulties that the presence of students with disabilities brings to the classroom.

## Conclusions

Empirical studies have found that gender, age, teachers' experiences and contact with students with special educational needs (Forlin, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) as well as working experience with students with special needs or exposure to people with disabilities (i.e., friend or family member) (Gething et al., 1997; Subban & Sharma, 2006) are among the factors influencing positive attitudes towards persons with special educational needs. On the

other hand, there are a few studies that have shown that female teachers have a greater level of tolerance regarding the inclusion of students with special educational needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Despite the fact that the vast majority of the respondents in both countries (Slovenia and Kosovo) are female, such indications are not identified in the current study.

Although slight differences were identified between the samples of the two countries, data measuring self-efficacy via the TEIP scale showed surprising results, as the teachers in both countries indicated high levels of self-efficacy in their self-administered questionnaires. Despite studies showing a strong link between teachers' self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards inclusion (Bandura, 1997; Jordan et al., 2009; Savolainen et al. 2012), the present research demonstrates the opposite for the samples in both countries.

However, studies worldwide have shown that many teachers have fewer positive attitudes towards students with special educational needs and their inclusion in mainstream education classrooms (Dupoux et al., 2005; Lorman et al., 2007; Ross-Hill, 2009). This might not necessarily disrupt teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy, which measures various sub-dimensions, including efficacy in collaboration, efficacy in managing behaviour and use of inclusive instructions. Teachers' attitudes towards children with special educational needs were also measured during the extraordinary circumstances of virtual classrooms and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Sakarneh (2022) found that, despite positive attitudes and perceptions, teachers in Jordan reported low self-esteem regarding the need to adapt e-learning to children with special educational needs. This particular study reflects how important it is for both sides of the learning process – teacher and student – to adopt the methodology and instruments that are in the best interest of the child, especially for students with special educational needs. In the present study, comparison of the attitudes and perceptions in two countries is important, especially considering the fact that Kosovo is still in the transition process and inclusive education policies and practices came to light only in 2011, when they were introduced in the Law on Pre-University Education. Meanwhile, an analysis by Ermenc (2020, p. 262) revealed that "the Slovenian policy primarily reflects a human rights-based understanding of inclusion, focused on students with special needs". This is done by respecting the standards for the placement of students with special educational needs, respecting the criteria for the academic preparation of teachers as per the requirements, and highlighting school involvement at all levels as crucial.

Exchanging knowledge and comparing inclusive education processes with other countries that have gone through similar processes in the past could

significantly support advancing inclusive policies and practices in Kosovo. Moreover, considering the fact that Kosovo is embracing an inclusive culture, it might also represent a good example with the potential to contribute regionally to inclusive education policies and practices. Positive sentiments, attitudes and perceptions regarding students with special educational needs are crucial for mainstream education, as they have a considerable impact on the academic achievement and performance of such students, as well as encouraging the inclusive practices and policies necessary for adequate reforms to ensure equality for all children.

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