Article

Teachers' Involvement in Inclusive Education: Attitudes of Future Teachers

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Abstract: Background: inclusive education seeks to ensure that all students can access quality education and requires education systems to commit to providing students with equal opportunities to participate in all aspects of school life. While progress has been made in this regard, the full implementation of educational inclusivity remains hindered by significant challenges and barriers. Teacher involvement is necessary for this inclusion, and it is important to study the attitudes that affect their inclusive practices in schools. Therefore, this study aims to determine the attitudes of future teachers (current student teachers at the University of the Basque Country) towards inclusive education. Methods: 369 primary and early childhood education students participated in this study. An ad hoc questionnaire was used to collect sociodemographic data, and the Revised Scale of Feelings, Attitudes, and Concerns Towards Inclusive Education (SACIE-R) was administered using Google Forms. Results: the results indicate that 34.9% of the respondents have close contact with people with functional diversity, while 62.7% state that they have never worked with people with diversity. Male primary and lower grade students are generally less negative toward functional diversity. Conclusions: this study shows where the main efforts should be focused to highlight the importance of inclusive schools, and for this purpose, university education will be essential.

Keywords: inclusive education; primary education; childhood education; attitudes

1. Introduction

Educational inclusion is an approach that seeks to ensure that all students have access to quality education, regardless of their social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or other differences [1]. Furthermore, educational inclusion implies a commitment by education systems to ensure all students have equal opportunities to learn and participate in school life [2]. In this sense, efforts will be made to ensure that students with functional diversity also have the same opportunities as other students. In this article we will use the term functional diversity to refer to people with physical, mental or sensory difficulties. We will use this term and not disability because a disability has functional limitations but people learn and use disability-specific tacit knowledge to identify, circumvent or master disability-specific challenges [3,4]. It is important to use this term as it does not carry a negative or medical character and emphasises the value of diversity [5].

Inclusion in education is a goal that many schools are working towards, but it is important to acknowledge that it is still a work in progress in many places. Implementing inclusion in schools is a complex and ongoing process that varies depending on the context and resources available [6]. While progress has been made in creating more inclusive learning environments, the full implementation of such inclusivity remains hindered by

significant challenges and barriers [7–9]. In some cases, this implementation has been limited by a lack of resources, such as funding, teacher training, and support services for students with disabilities or diverse learning needs [10]. Additionally, cultural or systemic barriers may make it difficult to promote inclusion, such as negative attitudes toward disability or a narrow view of what it means to be a "successful" student [11]. This lack of inclusion in schools is a serious problem that negatively affects students and the wider society. Exclusionary practices in schools can result in a range of negative outcomes, such as low academic achievement, social isolation, and reduced opportunities for future success [12].

Teacher involvement is vital for achieving a more inclusive school. Teachers need to adopt a new way of thinking that challenges traditional views of education and be willing to adapt their practices to meet the needs of diverse learners better [13]. Nevertheless, they must undergo more profound changes before transforming their pedagogical practices. According to Armstrong and Tsokova [14], teachers must develop a critical awareness of the social, cultural, and political factors that impact education and students' lives. This requires a deep understanding of the power dynamics within schools and broader society as well as a willingness to challenge and transform oppressive structures and practices.

In the last 20 years, many authors have been concerned with teacher attitudes that affect inclusive practices in schools [15–17]. Attitudes constitute an area of research in social psychology that has been extensively studied due to the connection between attitudes and discriminatory behaviors [18]. In the context of inclusive education, attitudes refer to teachers' personal beliefs and feelings towards this specific societal issue [19], and they play an essential role in creating an inclusive school environment. To comprehensively analyze attitudes toward inclusion, it is important to consider the following three accepted dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral [20]. The cognitive dimension refers to the perception of having a single school for all students; the affective dimension concerns the emotions that arise in response to inclusion; and the behavioral dimension reflects the willingness to take equitable action toward all students. From this viewpoint, Rodriguez-Fuentes et al. [21] state that the attitude toward inclusive education can be seen as the alignment of beliefs, perceptions, opinions, and relevant information regarding a school's capacity to cater to students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (the cognitive component), along with the emotions linked to school normalization (affective component) and, consequently, the predisposition or tendency to act and behave appropriately (the behavioral component).

Based on these elements of teacher attitudes, several studies have been conducted in recent years on the specific components that affect real inclusive education. Among these studies, Van Steen and Wilson [22], in a recent meta-analysis on this topic, identified several teacher attitudes that can improve educational inclusion, including positive attitudes towards diversity; a willingness to learn and collaborate; commitment to inclusion, flexibility, and adaptability; and high expectations for all students. Saloviita [23] states that even though the advancement of inclusive education is linked to the evolution of cultural values, the potential for greater inclusion in schools is also closely related to the availability of sufficient resources.

Other factors also affect teachers' attitudes to inclusive education. Some studies suggest that age could influences teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, while others argue that this factor has no significant impact. For example, a study published by Arnaiz et al. [24] found that the age of primary school teachers was not significantly associated with their attitudes toward inclusive education, with their findings being confirmed by subsequent research [25]. However, another study [26,27] found that younger teachers in Bulgarian kindergartens had more positive attitudes toward inclusive education than their older colleagues. It is worth noting that the relationship between age and teachers' attitudes toward inclusion may vary depending on the specific context and population being studied.

The relationship between gender and teacher attitudes has also been analyzed over the last two decades. Although many studies have not found a positive correlation between these variables [24,25], other research has revealed a gap in which women have notably better attitudes than men towards inclusive education and children with special educational needs [15,23,28].

Finally, other studies have also emphasized that attitudes towards students with special educational needs vary significantly according to the teacher's profile. These studies [29] claim that special education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are better than those of general teachers. This difference is related to perceived personal efficacy when dealing with the activities of learners with special educational needs, since better personal efficacy leads to more positive attitudes toward inclusive education in general.

Despite the large body of research on this issue, there is a need for more focused studies involving specific contexts and times. Moreover, the cultural development of each context is different, so attitudes toward this issue study will differ accordingly. Similarly, studies carried out in the past will have yielded results that do not correspond to the current reality. For this reason, the present study aims to fill this gap in the scientific literature.

Specifically, this study aims to determine the attitudes of future teachers (those currently pursuing their education studies at the University of the Basque Country) towards inclusive education, analyzing their feelings, attitudes, and concerns. In particular, the specific objectives are to analyze future teachers' feelings, attitudes, and concerns towards inclusive education, considering their gender, age, and teaching specialty (early childhood or primary education students).

First, we hypothesize that there will be significant gender differences, with females showing more positive feelings, attitudes, and concerns towards inclusive education than males. Second, it is expected that the age of the students will not be a factor affecting their feelings, attitudes, and concerns toward inclusive education. Finally, it is also anticipated that future early childhood education teachers—that is, students of the early childhood education degree—will have more positive feelings, attitudes, and concerns towards inclusive education than those studying for a degree in primary education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Three hundred sixty-nine young students from the University of the Basque Country, Spain, participated in this study. Participants ranged from 18 to 35 years of age (M = 19.81, SD = 1.86); 78.2% (n = 291) were women, and 21% (n = 78) were men. In terms of age, 74.2% (n = 276) were aged 18–20, and 25.8% (n = 96) were aged 21–35. Regarding their teaching specialty, 48.5% (n = 180) were from the early childhood education degree and 51.5% (n = 192) from the primary education degree. Finally, 56.5% (n = 210) were in the second year of the degree, 33.5% (n = 123) in the first year, and 10.5% (n = 39) in the fourth year.

2.2. Instruments

An ad hoc questionnaire was used to collect data on gender, age, degree, academic year, previous studies, previous knowledge of functional diversity, and proximity to people with functional diversity in the immediate environment.

The Revised Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE-R). This instrument was used to determine the attitudes, feelings, and concerns of the student teachers toward inclusion [25], in its version adapted to Spanish by Navarro-Mateau et al. [30]. The 3-factor structure of this theory-based scale consists of 15 items with a 5-point Likert-type response format. The three factors are as follows: (1) feelings toward inclusion (e.g., I prefer brief interactions with people with disabilities and end the interaction as soon as possible); (2) attitudes toward inclusion (e.g., I believe that children who have difficulty expressing their thoughts should be in the same classroom as their peers); and (3) concerns or worries about inclusion (e.g., I am concerned that the class accepts people

with special needs). The items of the feelings and concerns subscales are reverse coded, so that a high score indicates positive attitudes and feelings and a low level of concerns. Reliability for the feeling subscale was 0.65; for attitudes, 0.89; and worries, 0.70.

2.3. Procedure

To carry out this research, we contacted the teaching staff of the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). We explained to them the objective of the study, which is to explore concerns about inclusive practice in future infant and primary school teacher, along with the procedures to be followed and the instruments to be used. Once in the classroom, the instructions for completing the questionnaires were explained aloud, and the students also read and signed a written consent form via Google Forms. They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the evaluation and that their participation was voluntary. Furthermore, all provisions of Regulation (EU) 2016/679, General Personal Data Protection, were complied with, i.e., personal data obtained by completing the questionnaire were processed with the consent of each participant and for the sole purposes of scientific promotion and dissemination.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 28.0 (Armonk, NY, USA). Two assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were then checked before conducting the corresponding analysis to decide whether to use parametric or non-parametric tests. Specifically, the critical level of $p < 0.05$ of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov statistic and Levene's statistic for homogeneity of variances were analyzed. The data were shown to violate the assumptions of normality, and therefore, non-parametric tests were used.

First, the subscales were formed by considering the correction rules proposed by the authors of the SACIE-R scale. Next, the frequency and percentage of the sociodemographic variables were calculated for the participant profile and other variables related to prior knowledge about functional diversity. Comparisons of means for independent samples were then conducted using the Mann–Whitney U statistic. Finally, the Kruskall–Wallis and Dunn's post hoc tests were used to analyze continuous variables from more than two groups since, as mentioned above, they did not meet the criteria of normality and homogeneity of variance for the use of parametric tests.

3. Results

3.1. Previous Knowledge about Functional Diversity and Associations as a Function of Age and Degree Subject (Teaching Specialty)

In the sample, 34.9% (n = 129) indicated that they have close contact with people with functional diversity, compared to 65.1% (n = 243) who indicated that they do not. Likewise, there is a statistically significant association, with a small effect size, between having close contact with people with functional diversity and age ($X^2(1) = 4.51$; $p < 0.034$; $V_{cramer} = 0.11$). In particular, when asked if they have close contact with people with functional diversity, a higher percentage of younger people in the sample answered "yes" compared to their older counterparts (23.5% vs. 11.4%).

Likewise, 62.7% (n = 234) of the students indicated that they have never worked with people with functional diversity, while 37.3% (n = 138) stated that they have worked with people with functional diversity on some occasions. Here, age again is significantly associated, with a small effect size ($X^2(1) = 8.94$; $p < 0.03$; $V_{cramer} = 0.15$) with whether or not participants have worked with people with functional diversity. Once again, a higher percentage of younger participants (18–20 (24.3%) vs. 21–35 (13%)) indicated that they have worked with people with functional diversity. In addition, the type of degree or teaching specialty is also significantly associated with the response given to this question ($X^2(1) = 14.31$; $p < 0.001$; $V_{cramer} = 0.20$); that is, a higher percentage of primary education students stated that they have worked with people with functional diversity compared with early childhood education students (24.1% vs. 13.3%). The academic year is also significantly

associated (X^2(1) = 24.80; $p < 0.001$; V_{cramer} = 0.26) with whether participants have previously worked with people with functional diversity, with a higher percentage of second year students answering "yes" (23.2%) than first (7.3%) and fourth year (6.8%) students.

Regarding knowledge of functional diversity, 68.7% (n = 171) stated that they have a little knowledge, 35.9% (n = 133) neither a lot nor a little, 5.1% (n = 19) stated that they know nothing, and only 0.3 (n = 1) stated they are fully knowledgable about working with people with functional diversity.

3.2. Feelings, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusion as a Function of Gender and Age

The results show significant gender differences in the feelings dimension (U = 12.9460.50; p = 0.005) (See Table 1), with a higher mean for men than women. This result indicates that male students show fewer negative feelings towards functional diversity than female students. However, in the case of females, as seen in Figure 1, an extreme case shows a higher median and is similar to the maximum score obtained by the men. As shown in Table 1, no significant gender differences were found for the remaining dimensions.

Table 1. Differences in feelings, attitudes, and concerns about functional diversity according to gender and age.

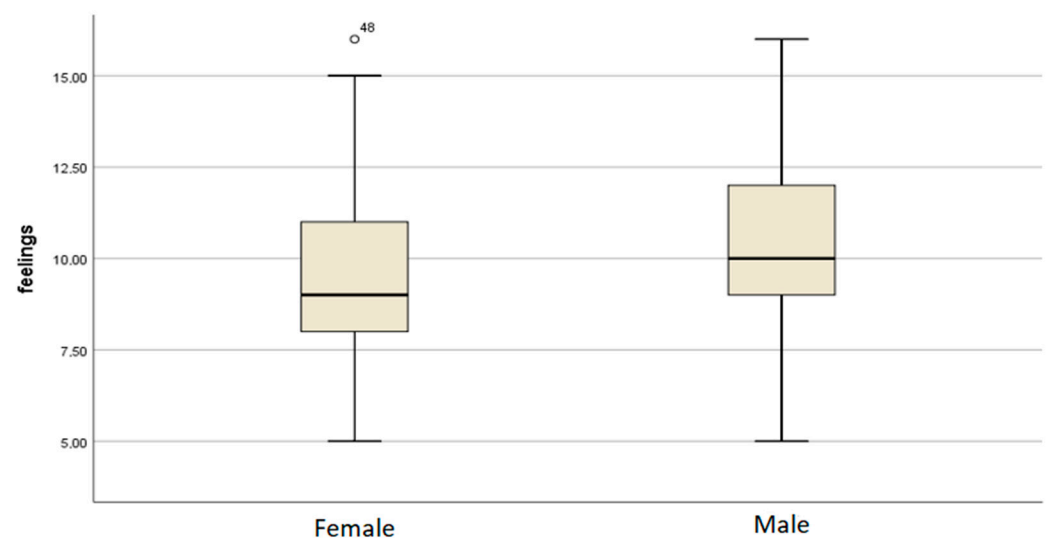|	*Mdn (IQR)*	*U*	*p*
Feelings			
Female	9 (9.04–9.57)	12.946.50	0.005
Males	10 (9.73–10.82)		
Attitudes			
Females	7 (7.36–8.10)	10.823.00	0.805
Males	6 (6.78–8.08)		
Concerns			
Females	13 (12.41–13.04)	11.389.00	0.607
Males	13 (12.14–13.49)		

Note: *IQR* = interquartile ranges.

Figure 1. Differences in feelings about functional diversity according to gender.

Table 2 shows the significant age differences in feelings, attitudes, and concerns. In this case, younger students show a higher median for all dimensions; that is, more positive feelings, greater attitudes toward inclusion, and a lower level of concern about working with students with functional diversity.

Table 2. Significant differences in feelings, attitudes, and concerns about functional diversity as a function of age.

	Mdn (IQR)	*U*	*p*
Feelings			
18–20	10 (9.39–9.94)	10.370.50	0.015
21–35	9 (8.57–9.47)		
Attitudes			
18–20	7 (7.78–8.57)	7.813.00	0.001
21–35	5 (5.82–6.79)		
Concerns			
18–20	13 (12.57–13.23)	10.914.00	0.037
21–35	13 (11.76–12.84)		

Note: *IQR* = interquartile ranges.

3.3. Feelings, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusion as a Function of University Degree (Teaching Specialty) and Academic Year

Table 3 shows the statistically significant differences in the feelings, attitudes, and concerns about the inclusion of people with functional diversity depending on the degree (teaching specialty) being studied. Regarding feelings, it appears that primary education students have more positive feelings toward interacting with people with functional diversity, while early childhood education students show a greater attitude toward including students with functional diversity in the mainstream classroom. Finally, primary education students are less concerned or worried about inclusion when working with students with functional diversity.

Table 3. Significant differences in feelings, attitudes, and concerns about functional diversity as a function of the degree (teaching specialty) being studied.

	Mdn (IQR)	*U*	*p*
Feelings			
Infant Education	9 (8.89–9.50)	18.413.50	0.022
Primary Education	10 (9.43–10.15)		
Attitudes			
Infant Education	7 (7.63–8.62)	14.280.50	0.008
Primary Education	6 (6.85–7.71)		
Concerns			
Infant Education	13 (11.91–12.74)	19.182.50	0.007
Primary Education	13 (12.76–13.52)		

Note: *IQR* = interquartile ranges.

Moreover, significant differences were observed according to the year of the participants' university degree. First- and second-year students showed the highest median scores on feelings and attitudes toward functional diversity. Second—and fourth-year students also show greater concerns about functional diversity, with significant differences between the first- and second-year students (see Table 4).

Table 4. Significant differences in feelings, attitudes, and concerns about functional diversity as a function of the year of the degree course.

	Mdn (IQR)	*U*	*p*	*Post Hoc*
Feelings				
First year	10 (9.03–9.77)	11.070	0.004	4 < 1–2
Second year	10 (9.43–10.08)			
Fourth year	8 (7.63–9.20)			
Attitudes				
First year	9 (8.54–9.75)	72.183	0.001	4 < 1–2; 2 < 1
Second year	6 (6.90–7.71)			
Fourth year	5 (4.99–5.45)			
Concerns				
First year	12 (11.81–12.46)	5.40	0.067	1 < 2
Second year	13 (12.72–13.44)			
Fourth year	13 (11.37–13.19)			

Note: *IQR* = interquartile ranges.

4. Discussion

This research has highlighted some noteworthy findings about future teachers' attitudes to diversity and inclusive education. First, it has been found that most of the student teachers have had no contact with people with functional diversity. This situation can make working with this type of student difficult, as the teachers do not have the tools or sufficient experience to respond to their needs. Furthermore, Forlin et al. [25] stated that prior contact with either a family member or close friend with a disability also directly affected attitudes and concerns. Moreover, almost 70% of the respondents stated that they have little or no knowledge about the specific work that needs to be performed with people with functional diversity. These findings align with previous works [23,31], arguing that educational success is largely based on confidence in professional competencies. For all these reasons, university education on inclusive education and attention to diversity is fundamental.

Concerning university education, our results suggest that elementary education teachers [24] have the most concerns and fears regarding attention to diversity. On the other hand, preschool education students show a more favorable attitude towards the inclusion of students with functional diversity in the ordinary classroom. These findings are similar to those reported by Stemberger and Kiswarday [32], who found that preschool teachers have better cognitive attitudes toward inclusive education. It is during this educational stage where attention to pupils with functional diversity is developed more inclusively, which could be why these teachers internalize their role as tutors of all types [24] of pupils more naturally. At the preschool education level, the type of methodology used is more inclusive, as work is carried out using free pedagogies or project-based content work. In short, the methodologies implemented allow for the greater participation of all pupils without being discriminated against because of their personal characteristics.

As mentioned in the introduction, the literature has shown no clear effect of gender on teachers' attitudes. However, in the present study, we have found that men have the least negative attitudes toward students with special educational needs, a pattern of findings not reported in any of the studies reviewed earlier in this article [15,23–25,27,28]. However, our findings might be due to the gender imbalance of our sample, since only 21% of the participants were male. Therefore, further research should be conducted to determine whether there have been recent changes regarding the impact of gender or if the trend observed in our study is an isolated finding.

Moreover, it has been shown that younger pre-service teachers have had more contact with people with functional diversity and show more positive feelings toward them. This also differs from many other studies that have found no relationship between attitudes and age [24,25,33]. Our results could be due to the emerging inclusive education policies in our region, which allow pupils with difficulties to remain in mainstream classrooms. This policy allows for direct contact between special education pupils and others. It can be

stated, therefore, that the regulations promoting inclusive education are crucial for greater contact between people with functional diversity and the rest of society.

These results have several implications for practice at both the school and higher education level. First, we must bear in mind the importance of creating truly inclusive schools where all people in society co-exist with people with functional diversity since this real and first-hand contact will be the optimal strategy for promoting inclusive societies in the future. But to create such an inclusive climate, it is also essential that teachers who lead the classrooms introduce inclusive pedagogies within them, and it will therefore be essential to work on their feelings, attitudes, and concerns toward diversity, which begins at university. In this regard, there is also much work to be done. For instance, there is a need to promote inclusive pedagogies in the curriculum of future primary education teachers, working on diversity from the perspective of different genders or even ages.

Our results should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, a non-probabilistic sample was used, which limits the generalizability of our findings. In addition, selection bias may have occurred, as participation was voluntary and, therefore, only those who were particularly emotionally affected might have been interested in taking part. Future studies should use a larger and more representative sample, with participants from other regions of Spain. However, a strength of the present work is that it is the first study conducted in the Basque Autonomous Community to measure future teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education. Therefore, the present findings are novel for the scientific community and may lead to new studies in other countries.

5. Conclusions

Our findings suggest that while increasing importance is being given to inclusive education, there is still significant work to be accomplished in training future teachers so that they can all implement inclusive pedagogies in their classrooms. Thus, the attitudes towards inclusive education should not be analyzed in an overall group since each age range has specific characteristics that might affect such attitudes. However, given that these young people will become future teachers and adults, it is imperative to develop measures to work on their feelings, attitudes, and concerns about inclusive education and people with functional diversity.

To this end, it is important to start working on inclusion by teaching university students intervention techniques and strategies for subsequent application in the classroom.

In the school classroom, work should always be approached from an inclusive perspective, as it is a cross-cutting competence in all subjects. Both in the school and in individual teaching practice, the school should always aim to educate inclusively. Regarding teacher intervention, it is essential that they assume an active role with all pupils, not only working on the values of inclusion, but also attending to all aspects of this hidden curriculum, which includes paying attention to materials and selecting these in accordance with inclusive values and needs.

Finally, the involvement of families—key agents in inclusion—will be essential. Therefore, offering information and sessions on inclusive education to families and teachers in the school could be a very positive step. However, this is a little-studied issue and should be analysed in depth. In this way, the real impact of the change of vision on families can be experienced, and it would be possible to work on the design of concrete proposals. Finally, with the help of all agents, improved outcomes will most likely emerge, and we will move ever closer to the inclusive school and society that we wish to achieve.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by Ethics Committee CEISH (M10_2022_324, 14 February 2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data can be consulted through the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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