

## Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education: Predictors Among Hungarian Teachers in Transylvania

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of this study is to highlight the demographic, disability-specific, pedagogical, and psychological factors that may predict Hungarian teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education in Transylvania. The study involved N = 233 teachers who completed a self-report demographic questionnaire and a set of instruments comprising the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale, the Attitudes and Perspectives Toward Persons with Disabilities Scale, the Special Education Preparedness Scale, and the Tolerance and Acceptance of Difference Scale. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that positive attitudes toward inclusion were most strongly predicted by special education preparedness and direct experiences with students with special educational needs (SEN), both within and outside of school contexts. Negative emotions toward SEN individuals emerged as the most significant inhibitory factor. Neither years of professional experience nor the type of teaching environment were significant predictors. The results support the Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior theoretical framework, suggesting that knowledge and experience jointly shape attitudes, which in turn influence behavior, in this case pedagogical practice. The findings underscore the importance of experiential, empathy-building teacher education that integrates special education knowledge to foster inclusive orientations.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, attitudes, special education needs, special education preparedness, tolerance, Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model

**ABSTRAKT.** Ziel dieser Studie ist es, demografische, behindertenspezifische, pädagogische und psychologische Faktoren aufzuzeigen, die die Einstellungen ungarischer Lehrkräfte in Siebenbürgen gegenüber inklusiver Bildung vorhersagen

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können. An der Studie nahmen  $N = 233$  Lehrkräfte teil, die einen demografischen Selbstbericht sowie einen Instrumentensatz bearbeiteten, bestehend aus der Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale, der Attitudes and Perspectives Toward Persons with Disabilities Scale, der Special Education Preparedness Scale und der Tolerance and Acceptance of Difference Scale. Hierarchische Regressionsanalysen zeigten, dass positive Einstellungen gegenüber Inklusion am stärksten durch die sonderpädagogische Vorbereitung und direkte Erfahrungen mit Schülerinnen und Schülern mit sonderpädagogischem Förderbedarf (Special Education Need, SEN) sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb der Schule vorhergesagt wurden. Negative Emotionen gegenüber SEN-Personen stellten den bedeutendsten hemmenden Faktor dar. Weder die Dauer der Berufserfahrung noch die Art der Unterrichtsumgebung erwiesen sich als signifikante Prädiktoren. Die Ergebnisse stützen den theoretischen Rahmen des Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior-Modells, wonach Wissen und Erfahrung gemeinsam Einstellungen formen, die wiederum das Verhalten, in diesem Fall die pädagogische Praxis, beeinflussen. Die Befunde betonen die Bedeutung erfahrungsorientierter, empathiefördernder Lehrkräfteausbildung, die sonderpädagogisches Wissen integriert, um inklusive Haltungen zu fördern.

**Schlüsselwörter:** inclusive Pädagogik, Einstellungen, sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf, sonderpädagogische Vorbereitung, Toleranz, Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB)-Modell

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive pedagogy and education can be approached from an attitude-based perspective, according to which teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and affect play a fundamental role in shaping convictions and pedagogical practices related to the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) (Boyle et al., 2020). The literature highlights several demographic, pedagogical, and psychological factors that can be identified as predictors of a positive inclusion-oriented perspective.

Special education preparedness - whether gained during university studies or other training programs - namely, prior training on teaching SEN students and methodological as well as didactic knowledge, is consistently emphasized in most studies as a major contributor to positive attitudes toward inclusion. Jurca et al. (2023) found that teachers who subjectively perceived their training in special education to be insufficient demonstrated less positive attitudes and reported lower self-efficacy regarding the inclusion of SEN students. Similar findings are reported in other studies, which underscore the mediating role of

self-efficacy, fostered through prior training and professional development, in shaping positive inclusion-oriented attitudes (Sharma et al., 2008; Vieira et al., 2024). The Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model (Alassaf, 2025) may help explain this effect, as it emphasizes that acquiring specialized knowledge directly contributes to attitude formation, which in turn may lead to behavioral change - namely, the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices.

In addition to formal training, direct teaching experiences with SEN students, as well as experiences outside of school settings, are also of considerable relevance for shaping positive attitudes. Dias and Cadime (2015) found that teachers with little to no experience teaching SEN students held significantly more negative views on inclusion compared to those with more extensive experience. This highlights the importance of practical exposure, alongside theoretical training, within teacher education. Likewise, findings suggest that non-school experiences with SEN individuals (e.g., through family or friendship networks) are also linked to greater acceptance of inclusion (Subban & Sharma, 2006). Such shared experiences and direct interactions may help dismantle stereotypes about difference.

A systematic review further revealed that novice teachers with less professional experience expressed more negative attitudes toward inclusive practices compared to their more experienced colleagues. A similar pattern was observed between teachers working in rural settings, who generally reported less favorable attitudes compared to those in urban contexts. Additionally, teachers' attitudes varied depending on the type of SEN student in question, with the most negative attitudes most frequently reported toward children with neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disabilities) (Linder et al., 2023).

Beyond demographic and pedagogical factors, psychological variables have also been found to play a significant role in shaping inclusion-related attitudes. Brandes and Crowson (2009) reported that higher levels of intolerance toward difference and negative feelings toward SEN individuals were negatively associated with positive inclusion attitudes. In other words, the stronger the presence of conservative social ideologies and discomfort toward difference, the less likely teachers are to support inclusive practices. This mechanism is further supported by studies showing that negative affect toward SEN students can inhibit positive inclusive practices by obstructing the development of supportive teacher-student relationships and effective collaboration (Lyra et al., 2023; Meyers & Lester, 2016).

While previous Romanian studies (Jurca et al., 2023) have examined teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, the present study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it specifically focuses on Hungarian-speaking

teachers in Transylvania, a culturally and linguistically distinct educational context that remains underrepresented in inclusion research. Second, beyond demographic and pedagogical variables, the study simultaneously examines psychological factors such as intolerance toward difference and negative emotions toward individuals with SEN, thereby offering a more integrative understanding of the predictors underlying inclusive attitudes. Finally, the study interprets these relationships through the framework of the Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model, providing a theoretically grounded perspective on attitude formation in inclusive education.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The aims of the study can be articulated on multiple levels. The study seeks to identify and examine factors that significantly predict the attitudes of Hungarian teachers in Transylvania toward inclusion. Since the success of inclusive education is strongly determined by teachers' attitudes, it is essential to clarify which demographic, intrapersonal, and professional characteristics play a role in shaping these attitudes. To ensure greater transparency, we analyze these predictors across three main variable groups: demographic and disability-specific factors, psychological factors, and pedagogical variables.

By identifying potential risk factors within these dimensions that may hinder the development of positive inclusion attitudes, the study aims to provide insights for the design of targeted interventions. Such interventions could support teachers, strengthen inclusive perspectives, and thereby promote the implementation of inclusive pedagogical practices.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### ***Participants***

To determine the ideal sample size, we followed the recommendations of the G\*Power program, which provides information on the minimum number of participants required to conduct statistical tests with adequate reliability (Kang, 2021). For hierarchical linear regression analysis with nine predictor variables, a medium effect size, and a statistical power of 0.95, a minimum of 166 participants was recommended (Faul et al., 2009).

The inclusion criteria specified that all participants had to be over 18 years old, working as Hungarian-speaking teachers in Transylvania. The sample was predominantly female (89.3%), with ages ranging from 24 to 65 years ( $M = 39.5$ ,  $SD = 9.48$ ). More than half of the participants (54.9%) taught in urban

settings, and most worked in mainstream schools (85.4%). The majority were primary (39.1%) and secondary school teachers (39.5%), though kindergarten teachers (20.5%) and higher education instructors (0.9%) were also represented. Most respondents (87.1%) reported having some teaching experience with SEN students, yet only a small proportion (7.3%) felt fully prepared for the task. Over half of the participants (50.6%) indicated that they had received no or only minimal special education training during their university years. Outside of school, the vast majority (81.1%) also reported having direct personal contact with SEN individuals.

### ***Ethics Statement***

A questionnaire-based procedure was employed to collect participants' demographic information and to assess their level of tolerance, attitudes toward inclusion, attitudes toward individuals with SEN and special education preparedness. All method and procedure complied with the with the professional requirements of the Romanian College of Psychologists (COPSI). The questionnaire package contained written information about the study as well as a consent statement for the participants.

### ***Instruments***

#### *Demographic Questionnaire*

Participants were asked about their gender, age, type of school setting (urban or rural), and institution type (mainstream or special school). Additional questions addressed the educational level they taught, their professional and personal experiences with SEN individuals (both in and out of school), and their subjective perception of preparedness for inclusive pedagogy, including prior university-level training on teaching SEN students.

#### *Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale*

This 14-item self-report scale assesses teachers' attitudes toward inclusion across four subscales: (a) attitudes toward inclusion (e.g., "Students who have attention problems should be in regular classes."), (b) concerns about inclusive education (e.g., "I am concerned that I do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach a student with special needs."), (c) emotions toward individuals with disabilities (e.g., "I am afraid to look straight at a person with a disability."), and (d) fear of disability (e.g., "I would be very distressed if I had a disability myself."). Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree). Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward inclusion, fewer concerns, less fear, and more favorable emotions toward SEN individuals.

*Attitudes and Perspectives Toward Persons with Disabilities Scale*

This scale measures attitudes toward individuals with SEN on two dimensions: cognitive beliefs (e.g., “People with SEN deserve to live where and how they want.”) and affective dispositions (e.g., “I find it difficult to approach people with SEN because I feel they are different from me.”). The 9-item scale uses a five-point Likert format (1 = not at all true; 5 = completely true), with some items reverse-coded. Higher total scores indicate stronger negative attitudes and emotions toward SEN individuals.

*Special Education Preparedness Scale*

This self-report scale evaluates teachers’ perceived level of preparedness in special education (Mecklenburg, 2021), including emotional, attitudinal, methodological, and didactic competencies (e.g., “I know what intellectual disability means,” “I know what an individual development plan is,” “I am sufficiently trained to teach students with intellectual disabilities in my field.”). Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). Higher scores reflect higher levels of preparedness and knowledge in special education.

*Tolerance and Acceptance of Difference Scale*

This 12-item self-report instrument measures general tolerance and acceptance of difference, providing a single overall index without subscales. Items address various aspects of difference (e.g., “It would be very bad if a homosexual boy or girl were placed in my class.”; “An unemployment office is opening on the ground floor of our building. I am afraid it will be full of strange people.”). Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree), where higher final scores indicate greater intolerance.

*Data Processing and Statistical Analysis*

The research was based on a cross-sectional, correlational arrangement (Lau, 2017). Following the completion of data collection, the obtained information was subjected to statistical analyses using the IBM SPSS 20 software package. As a first step, we carried out a data cleaning process, which resulted in a final sample of  $N = 233$  Hungarian teachers from Transylvania. Prior to the analyses, various statistical assumptions were tested. These included the examination of descriptive statistical data, reliability analysis, linearity, multicollinearity, and the assumption of homoscedasticity (Pallant, 2011). Subsequently, hierarchical multiple linear regression was performed, in which predictor variables were entered sequentially in theoretically defined block (Roustaei, 2024). In the

regression analysis, demographic and disability-specific variables were entered first, and the direction and strength of the relationships were checked. Such variables included the place of teaching, years of professional experience, prior experience with teaching students with SEN, the type of SEN encountered in the school context, the presence of direct contact with a person with SEN outside the school context, as well as the degree of preparation received during university studies regarding the education of students with SEN. Demographic and disability-specific variables were treated and entered into the model as dummy variables. This allowed us to include the presence or absence of particular categories or conditions (Neifer, 2024). The second model incorporated pedagogical variables, which in this case referred to the degree of special education preparedness. Finally, in addition to the previous two, the third model added psychological variables to the analysis, specifically negative emotions toward individuals with SEN and feelings of intolerance toward difference.

## RESULTS

### *Preliminary analysis*

The data processing began with the examination of descriptive statistics and reliability analysis. Information related to the obtained data is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Summary of descriptive statistics and reliability analysis of the variables*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Cronbach <math>\alpha</math></b>
Attitude toward inclusion	233	25	53	37.150	5.850	.703
Special education preparedness	233	23	48	34.875	4.716	.722
Intolerance toward difference	233	12	35	19.227	4.985	.784
Attitude toward individuals with SEN	233	9	37	20.596	5.208	.780

The descriptive statistics for the variables attitude toward inclusion, special education preparedness, attitude toward individuals with SEN, and intolerance toward difference include the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values. The normal distribution of the variables themselves was not examined,

given that the assumption for conducting linear regression requires only the residuals - not the variables themselves - to be normally distributed (Schmidt & Finan, 2018). The results presented in the Table 1 indicate that all measurement instruments used in the study demonstrate adequate reliability, and are therefore suitable for the appropriate examination of the targeted psychological and pedagogical constructs. This is supported by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values greater than .700 across all four scales (Izah et al., 2024).

Among the assumptions, the examination of multicollinearity was also included, as one of the fundamental requirements of predictive analyses is that the potential predictor variables entered into the models should be approximately independent of one another (Shrestha, 2020). Multicollinearity can be identified when two or more variables display excessively strong linear relationships, which may distort the estimated regression coefficients and consequently compromise the interpretability and reliability of the model. To rule this out, indicators such as the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values were examined (Flatt & Jacobs, 2019). The former reflects the extent to which the variance of a given predictor is potentially inflated due to its correlation with other predictors, with values above 5 possibly indicating a problem (Shrestha, 2020). In contrast, tolerance refers to the proportion of variance in a predictor that is not explained by the other predictors; based on literature standards, values below .20 may suggest an issue (Senaviratna & Cooray, 2019). For the predictor variables entered into the model, the VIF values ranged between 1.082 and 1.256, meeting the  $VIF < 5$  criterion. The tolerance values ranged between .796 and .925, likewise fulfilling the  $tolerance > .20$  condition. Taken together, these results indicate that no issues with multicollinearity were present. In other words, no substantial linear relationships existed among the predictor variables, thus making the regression analysis feasible.

***Demographic, disability-specific, pedagogical and psychological predictors of teachers' attitudes toward inclusion***

The study employed a three-phase hierarchical regression analysis. In this process, we examined the relationships and predictive strength of different groups of variables in relation to attitudes toward inclusion. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The results of the hierarchical regression

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
(Constant)	38.457*	.538		29.086*	3.125		40.640*	4.264	
Place of teaching (Village)	-.706	.878	-.056	-.614	.863	-.049	-.050	.860	-.004
Professional experience (Low)	.123	1.449	.006	.308	1.425	.014	-.557	1.403	-.026
Teaching experience with SEN students (No)	-.247	1.685	-.010	-.091	1.656	-.004	.354	1.614	.014
Type of SEN encountered (Neurodevelopmental disorder)	-1.406	2.629	-.035	-1.708	2.584	-.042	-.966	2.520	-.024
Direct contact with SEN outside the school (No)	-2.216*	.931	-.155	-2.171	.915	-.152	-1.252	.906	-.106
University preparation for teaching SEN students (No)	-1.833*	.838	-.146	-.901*	.878	-.072	-.970	.854	-.077
Special education preparedness				.259*	.085	.208	.128	.089	.103
Intolerance toward difference							-.107	.081	-.091
Negative emotions toward individuals with SEN							-.253*	.081	-.225
R	.236			.305			.388		
R <sup>2</sup>	.056*			.093*			.150*		
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.031			.065			.116		

Notes. N = 233. \*p < .05. Model 1 included demographic and disability-specific factors. Model 2 included pedagogical factors. Model 3 included psychological factors.

In the first model, various demographic and disability-specific variables were entered, which were treated as dummy variables (Neifer, 2024). These included: place of teaching, years of professional experience, prior experience in teaching students with SEN, the type of SEN encountered in the school context, the presence of direct contact with a person with SEN outside the school context, and the degree of preparation received during university studies for teaching students with SEN. After testing the model, it was found that the introduced variables predicted positive attitudes toward inclusion significantly but accounted for only 5.6% of the variance ( $R^2 = .056$ ,  $F(6,226) = 2.222$ ,  $p = .042$ ). Significant factors included the lack of prior personal contact with SEN students ( $B = -2.216$ ,  $p = .042$ ) as well as the lack of prior university preparation ( $B = -1.833$ ,  $p = .030$ ).

As the second step, pedagogical variables were added to the existing demographic and disability-specific predictors, namely the degree of special education preparedness. As a result, the explained variance increased by an additional 3.7% ( $\Delta R^2 = .037$ ), meaning that with this new group of variables, the model explained 9.3% of the variance ( $R^2 = .093$ ,  $F(7,225) = 3.296$ ,  $p = .002$ ). The findings indicate that special education preparedness was identified as a statistically significant positive predictor of positive attitudes toward inclusion ( $B = .259$ ,  $p = .003$ ). At the same time, the lack of direct contact with individuals with SEN remained a significant negative predictor.

In the third stage of the analysis, psychological variables were added, namely negative emotions toward individuals with disabilities and intolerance toward diversity. This step resulted in a further substantial increase in explanatory power ( $\Delta R^2 = .057$ ), such that in total, the model accounted for 15% of the variance ( $R^2 = .150$ ,  $F(9,223) = 4.382$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Negative attitudes toward individuals with SEN emerged as the strongest predictor in the model ( $B = -.253$ ,  $p = .002$ ), showing a negative association with positive attitudes toward inclusion. Regarding psychological factors, intolerance toward diversity did not prove to be a significant predictor ( $p = .186$ ).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous research (Boyle et al., 2020; Jurca et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2008; Vieira et al., 2024), while also reinforcing the validity and relevance of the Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model (Alassaf, 2025). Our results underscore the multidimensional character of attitude formation, suggesting that the development of positive inclusive attitudes is simultaneously shaped by demographic, pedagogical, and psychological factors.

Specifically, the absence of direct contact and interaction with individuals with SEN, as well as insufficient prior university training concerning the education of SEN students, emerged as significant predictors of more negative inclusive attitudes. Conversely, stronger methodological and special educational preparedness was clearly identifiable as a predictor of positive attitudes, highlighting the direct attitude-shaping role of knowledge and expertise. A further noteworthy contribution of our model lies in its emphasis on the role of teachers' affective experiences. It became evident that teachers' negative emotions toward individuals with SEN fostered less favorable orientations toward inclusive education, aligning with the conclusions of Brandes and Crowson (2009) and Lyra et al. (2023).

In contrast to the preliminary findings of Linder et al. (2023), our study did not identify the type of SEN, the length of professional experience, or the teaching context as significant predictors. This may be explained by the fact that, in the present sample, the qualitative aspects of experience - such as special educational preparedness or direct contact with individuals with SEN - played a more salient role than the quantitative dimension of professional experience. Another possible explanation may be the relatively undifferentiated representation of urban versus rural teaching contexts in this population.

Although the final model explained a relatively modest proportion of variance in attitudes toward inclusion (15%), this finding is consistent with the multifactorial nature of inclusive attitudes described in previous literature. Teachers' orientations toward inclusion are likely shaped by numerous additional factors that were not examined in the present study, including organizational climate, institutional support, perceived workload, burnout, personality characteristics, previous personal experiences, and broader socio-cultural attitudes toward disability. Therefore, the current findings should be interpreted as highlighting several meaningful but partial predictors within a considerably more complex attitudinal system.

Taken together, these findings indicate that positive inclusive orientations cannot be reduced to a single factor or dimension. Both the theoretical framework of the KAB model and the present results point to the need for teacher education to encompass not only the transmission of theoretical knowledge but also direct experiential learning opportunities with individuals with SEN. As a recommendation for future practice, the development of teachers' core competencies in special education should be complemented with sensitization and empathy-building practical elements, since adequate professional and methodological preparedness, along with more balanced emotional patterns toward individuals with SEN, may serve as protective factors against negative inclusive attitudes.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

First, as the study is based on a correlational design, it does not allow for the exploration of causal relationships. Therefore, the predictors identified at the level of the results can indicate associations but cannot demonstrate causality. Furthermore, the specific nature of the sample may also be considered a limitation in certain respects. Since all the targeted and ultimately included participants were Hungarian-speaking teachers from Transylvania, the findings cannot be generalized beyond this population and are strictly applicable only to this specific group. Although the study worked with a sufficient number of cases for statistical analyses, the distribution of certain parameters or demographic characteristics (e.g. teachers working in urban versus rural contexts) was not proportional, which may also have influenced the outcomes. As the research employed self-report instruments, there is a possibility that in the case of certain constructs, results were biased. For example, due to social desirability, some teachers may have reported more positive attitudes than those that are actually reflected in their pedagogical practice. The fact that the final model accounted for only 15% of the variance also highlights that many potentially significant factors were not included in the analysis. Such factors may relate both to the organizational culture and resources of schools as well as to subjective intra- and interpersonal components, the inclusion of which would be warranted in future research on this topic. Moreover, future investigations could be complemented with qualitative methods, such as interviews, in order to gain a more accurate understanding of teachers' attitudes and emotional patterns. Finally, it would be advisable to examine the effectiveness of different interventions, such as sensitization programs or methodological trainings, which could also provide insights into possible causal mechanisms underlying attitude formation.

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