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# The Mediating Role of Special Education Preparedness in the Relationship Between Attitudes Toward Individuals with SEN and Attitudes Toward Inclusion

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## Abstract

This study examines the mediating role of special education preparedness in the relationship between attitudes toward individuals with special education needs (SEN) and attitudes toward inclusion. We worked with a total of N = 233 Hungarian teachers in Transylvania, from whom information was obtained through self-administered questionnaires. The research was based on a cross-sectional, correlational design. The results show that a higher level of special education preparedness was significantly and negatively correlated with negative attitudes toward individuals with SEN, while a positive correlation was found with more favorable attitudes toward inclusion. The mediation analysis indicates the partial mediating role of special education preparedness in the relationship between negative attitudes toward individuals with SEN and positive attitudes toward inclusion. The practical implications of the results highlight that, during teacher training, special attention should be paid to the integration of differentiated teaching methods, adapted educational practices and empathy development in relation to SEN students, which can foster more favorable attitudes toward inclusion.

### Keywords:

attitudes, inclusion, mediation, special education needs, special education preparedness

## 1. Introduction

The preliminary literature review thus indicates a significant correlation between attitudes toward inclusion, attitudes toward people with special education needs (SEN), and the level of special education preparedness. In the presence of negative belief systems and emotional attitudes, the perceived level of preparedness is likely to be rated lower. Conversely, adequate preparedness is associated with a higher likelihood of a supportive attitude toward inclusive approaches and practices (Alassaf, 2025; Viera et al., 2024), as well as lower levels of prejudice toward individuals who are different (Gal et al., 2025). In this context, special education preparedness may function as a mediating factor in the development of teachers' attitude systems.

Based on this, the objectives of our study can be formulated on several levels. Firstly, we aim to increase the number of scientific studies available on the subject, as a review of the literature shows that few analyses deal with the relationship between special education preparedness, attitudes toward people with SEN, and inclusion in an integrated manner. Although the scientific field addresses each of the above-mentioned areas in a segmented form, studies are less focused on analyzing the overall relationship among

them. The main objective of our research is to examine special education preparedness as an explanatory factor in the relationship between attitudes toward people with SEN and attitudes toward inclusion. In terms of methodology, we sought not only to draw conclusions about the correlations between the identified constructs, but also to create and test a theoretical model that would allow us to explore mediating effects. This approach enables us to reflect on the extent to which our results correspond to preliminary theoretical frameworks, while also allowing the current methodological structure to highlight certain pedagogical and psychological explanatory mechanisms more precisely.

From a practical perspective, our research results may indicate the explanatory role of special education preparedness in relation to SEN students and attitudes toward their inclusion and co-education. This allows us to identify risk factors that may hinder the success of inclusive educational practices, thereby providing potential guidance for the development and organization of teacher preparation and training programs.



## 2. Theoretical foundation

In terms of the conditions for the successful implementation of inclusive education, the literature identifies teachers' attitudes as one of the most relevant factors (Anthos, 2024). In this context, attitudes can be defined as the totality of teachers' convictions, belief systems, emotional patterns, and behavioral manifestations (Kahveci, 2023), which can directly influence how teachers perceive their professional role, their cooperation with students, and their general views on teaching and educational processes and methods (Clinton et al., 2023; Gidlund, 2018).

The formation of an inclusive attitude is greatly influenced by the teacher's basic emotional patterns and attitudes toward diversity and people with SEN (Lyra et al., 2023). Teachers with a more negative view of individuals with SEN are likely to perceive their inclusion in mainstream education as a greater challenge. In contrast, a more positive attitude may favor greater willingness and adaptability in learning about and applying differentiated teaching practices (Levins et al., 2005). This is supported by findings showing that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion can be shaped by their concerns, reservations, and beliefs regarding different types of SEN.

The results indicate more positive emotional patterns in cases of specific learning disorders or other milder developmental differences, while more pronounced negative emotional attitudes are observed in children with neurological developmental problems, which may influence the development of inclusion intentions and pedagogical practices (Linder et al., 2023).

From the perspective of fostering a positive attitude toward inclusion, the level of special education training is also considered crucial (Razalli et al., 2021). Various theories based on competence (Cate et al., 2018) and self-efficacy (Yeşilyurt, 2014) emphasize that professional knowledge, along with sufficient methodological and lexical expertise, can enhance teachers' perceived effectiveness in teaching and educating diverse, heterogeneous groups (Alassaf, 2025; Viera et al., 2024). A correlation can also be identified between attitudes toward people with SEN, attitudes toward inclusion, and special education preparedness. While negative attitudes can reinforce avoidant and non-supportive approaches to preparation and skill development, the acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills may promote greater openness and a more favorable attitude toward people

with SEN and their inclusive education (Gal et al., 2025; Yada et al., 2022).

## 3. Research methodology

### 3.1. Participants

We used the G\*Power program to determine the required sample size. Since our analysis was based on a three-variable multiple linear regression, the ideal sample size was calculated to be 119 individuals, assuming 95% statistical power and a medium effect size. When adjusting to the 80% statistical power commonly applied in the social sciences, with the same effect size, the recommended minimum sample size would be 77 individuals (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2014). The final sample size of our study was  $N = 233$ , which exceeds the specified requirements.

All 233 participants were over 18 years of age, worked in Transylvania, were native Hungarian speakers, and carried out their work in Hungarian. The majority of participants were women (89.3%), with the remainder being men. The sample's age range was 24-65 years, with an average of  $M = 39.5$  years ( $SD = 9.48$ ). Slightly more than half of the respondents (54.9%) worked in urban schools, while the rest were employed in rural settings. The educational distribution of the sample was heterogeneous: most teachers worked in secondary schools (39.5%), followed closely by those teaching in elementary schools (39.1%). A smaller proportion were kindergarten teachers (20.5%), while only a few (0.9%) worked in higher education. The majority of respondents (87.1%) reported having prior experience teaching students with SEN, yet only a small proportion (7.3%) felt fully prepared for such teaching and educational tasks. Furthermore, slightly more than half of the participants (50.6%) indicated that they had received little or no preparation during their university studies for working with SEN students. Beyond the school context, a substantial proportion of respondents (81.1%) also reported prior direct contact and interaction with individuals with SEN.

### 3.2. Instruments

#### 3.2.1. Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic data sheet included questions regarding teachers' gender, age, place of teaching, educational level, and type of institution. In relation to inclusive education, participants were asked about their previous teaching experience with SEN students and whether they had had direct interactions with them outside of school. Their subjective sense of preparedness for inclusive education of SEN students

was also assessed, along with the extent to which they felt their university studies had prepared them for integration and inclusive teaching practices.

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

The self-administered scale examining teachers' attitudes toward inclusion consists of 14 statements and measures four distinct dimensions. It includes subscales on attitudes toward inclusion, concerns about inclusive education, feelings toward individuals with SEN, and fear of becoming disabled. The evaluation process is the same across all four subscales, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4 (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree). Both subscale and total scale scores can be calculated by summing the ratings given to the items. Higher scores indicate a more accepting attitude, fewer concerns about inclusion, and a more positive, balanced emotional orientation toward individuals with SEN and disability.

### 3.2.3. *Attitudes and Perspectives Toward Persons with Disabilities Scale*

The 9-item self-report measure assesses attitudes toward individuals with SEN and consists of two subscales. One subscale focuses on cognitive attitudes, primarily addressing ways of thinking and general beliefs about individuals with SEN, while the other targets emotional attitudes, capturing affective reactions and experiences directed toward them. The items are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all characteristic; 5 = completely characteristic), and the scale also includes reverse-coded items. Total scores are obtained by summing responses, with higher scores indicating more negative opinions, beliefs, and convictions about individuals with SEN, as well as stronger negative emotional reactions toward them.

### 3.2.4. *Special Education Preparedness Scale*

The 12-item scale was developed to assess teachers' level of special education preparedness. Although it does not include separate dimensions or subscales, its items cover emotional and attitudinal aspects as well as didactic and methodological aspects, thereby providing a comprehensive profile. Items are rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4 (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree). A total score can be calculated by summing the responses, with higher scores reflecting a greater level of special education preparedness.

### 3.3. *Design*

According to Adams & Lawrence (2018), cross-sectional, correlational research, which is a non-experimental research design, is characterized by a relatively short time frame, one-time data collection, and no intervention, with the aim of identifying relationships between the variables under study. While the correlational strategy is not suitable for demonstrating causal relationships, its main purpose is to capture the simultaneous presence of different variables or characteristics and to examine their relationships. This study is similarly based on a cross-sectional, correlational strategy, in which we conducted correlation analyses, regression analyses, and mediation analysis. In this process, we examined the relationship between specific predictor and outcome variables, with the presence of a mediating factor. In the model, the predictor variable was attitude toward people with SEN, the outcome variable was attitude toward inclusion, and the mediating variable was the level of special education preparedness.

### 3.4. *Procedure*

The research process began with the collection and synthesis of preliminary findings relevant to the topic. Subsequently, we selected the instruments used to measure the designated constructs. In doing so, we placed emphasis on employing tools grounded in the current theoretical frameworks applied in international research, which we adapted to the specific characteristics of the adult Hungarian population in Transylvania.

The questionnaire package included a demographic data sheet, a scale measuring feelings, attitudes, and concerns toward inclusive education, a scale measuring attitudes and perspectives toward individuals with special educational needs, and a scale assessing special education preparedness. Data collection was carried out online over a period of approximately two months. The toolkit was distributed to schools in Transylvania, where we were able to target and involve Hungarian-speaking teachers. The estimated completion time for respondents was 10-15 minutes.

The data processing phase began with cleaning procedures, which resulted in a final sample of  $N = 233$  individuals. Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS 20, with mediation analysis performed through PROCESS Macro.

#### 4. Results

The data analysis process began with an examination of descriptive statistics and reliability testing. The descriptive statistics include the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values of the measured variables (Pallant, 2010), along with the skewness and kurtosis values. According to George and Mallery (2019), the kurtosis and skewness indices are considered acceptable if they fall within the range of -2.00 to +2.00. In the present study, skewness values ranged from -.090 to .165, while kurtosis values ranged from -.287 to -.375. These results indicate that the assumption of normality was not violated, and thus the use of parametric tests was deemed appropriate. Further examination of the prerequisites included checking the reliability of the instruments. Since the scales used in the study each had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above .700, following the recommendations of Tavakol and Dennick (2011), it can be concluded that all three are suitable for the reliable measurement of the psychological and pedagogical constructs they are intended to assess. A summary of the descriptive statistics and reliability indicators are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of descriptive statistical data and reliability indicators for variables*

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach alpha
Attitudes toward inclusion	233	25	53	37.150	5.850	.080	-.429	.703
Special education preparedness	233	23	48	34.875	4.716	-.090	-.287	.722
Attitudes toward individuals with SEN	233	9	37	20.596	5.208	.165	-.375	.780

**Table 2**

*Results of correlations between variables*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Special education preparedness	-		
2. Attitudes toward individuals with SEN	-.421**	-	
3. Attitudes toward inclusion	.273*	-.344**	-

Notes: \*\*  $p < .01$ .

The basic condition for the creation and testability of the mediation model is the presence of statistically significant correlations between the variables that constitute the model (Hayes, 2018). To examine these relationships, we used Pearson's correlation test, conducting analyses between special education preparedness, attitudes toward individuals with SEN, and attitudes toward inclusion. The results are presented in Table 2.

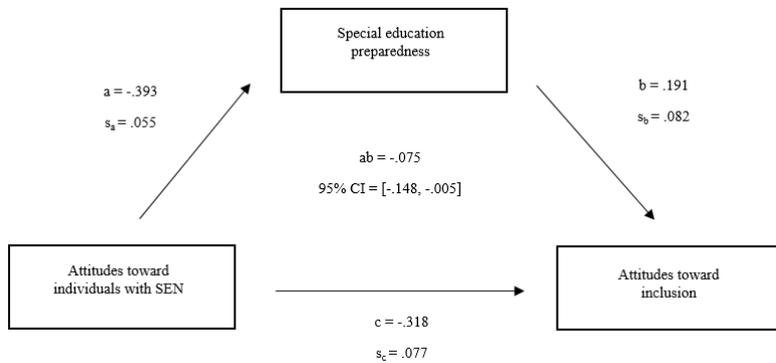
The findings suggest that special education preparedness is significantly and negatively correlated with attitudes toward individuals with SEN ( $r = -.421$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The negative direction of the relationship can be explained by the fact that the scale measuring attitudes toward individuals with SEN assesses negative attitudes, whereas the scale measuring preparedness reflects positive aspects, such as its presence and quality. In this sense, the relationship can be interpreted as follows: teachers with a higher degree of special education preparedness report fewer negative emotions toward individuals with SEN. The reverse of this pattern may also be true, teachers who hold more negative attitudes toward individuals with SEN tend to report lower levels of special education preparedness. Special education preparedness is also significantly and positively correlated with inclusion attitudes ( $r = .344$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This positive relationship suggests that a higher level of special education preparedness is associated with more favorable attitudes toward inclusion. Finally, a significant negative correlation was observed between attitudes toward individuals with SEN and attitudes toward inclusion ( $r = -.344$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similar to the first case, this negative pattern may be attributed to the specific characteristics of the measurement scales. While higher scores on the attitudes-toward-SEN scale indicate more negative attitudes, higher scores on the inclusion attitudes scale indicate more positive attitudes. Thus, the results suggest that teachers who express more negative attitudes and emotions toward individuals with SEN are also more likely to hold unfavorable beliefs about inclusion.

As a further step in the analysis, a mediation analysis was performed to examine whether a potential mediator plays a partial or full mediating role in the relationship between a predictor variable and an outcome variable (VanderWeele, 2016). In the current model, the assumed mediator is special education preparedness in the relationship between attitudes toward people with SEN and attitudes toward inclusion. For the analysis, we applied a 10.000-bootstrap procedure and used a 95% confidence level

(Fossum & Montoya, 2023). The results were interpreted by examining the direct, indirect, and total effects (Schuler et al., 2022). The mediation model is illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Special education preparedness as a mediating factor between attitudes toward individuals with SEN and attitudes toward inclusion*



Based on the results obtained, it can be stated that attitude toward people with SEN appears as a negative predictor of the perception of special education preparedness ( $a = -.393$ ,  $SE = .055$ ). It should be noted that the attitude scale measures negative attitudes, while the preparedness scale measures higher, more significant preparedness, which explains the negative effect. In this sense, more negative attitudes and emotional patterns toward people with SEN are associated with a less favorable perception of special education preparedness. Regarding special education preparedness, it is a statistically significant positive predictor of the formation of inclusion attitudes ( $b = .191$ ,  $SE = .082$ ). From a practical perspective, this means that greater special education preparedness predicts a more favorable attitude and more positive beliefs regarding inclusive education. The direct effect is statistically significant and negative, suggesting that attitudes toward people with SEN may influence the formation of positive attitudes toward inclusion not only indirectly but also directly ( $c = -.318$ ,  $SE = .077$ ). The indirect effect was also statistically significant ( $ab = -.075$ ), as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval (95% CI =  $-.148, -.005$ ) does not include 0. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the level of special education preparedness is a partial mediating factor in the relationship between attitudes toward people with SEN and attitudes toward inclusion.

## 5. Discussions

In terms of the theoretical framework, it became apparent that attitudes in this context can be interpreted as the sum of teachers' specific convictions, beliefs, emotional patterns, and

behavioral involvement. This indicates that attitudes toward inclusion are determined not only by professional knowledge and knowledge-based components but also by various psychological and emotional factors (Kahveci, 2023). These factors can directly influence not only the nature of inclusive educational practices but also cooperation with students (Clinton et al., 2023; Gidlund, 2018).

The results of the research emphasize significant correlations between teachers' supportive attitudes toward inclusion, their special education preparedness, and their positive emotional attitudes toward people with SEN. Specifically, a statistically significant correlation was found between negative beliefs and emotions toward people with SEN and positive attitudes toward inclusive education, consistent with the findings of Lyra et al. (2023). Practically, this indicates that teachers who display more negative attitudes and emotions toward students with disabilities may also be more resistant to the principles and practices of inclusive education. This highlights the importance of addressing emotional components when supporting the formation of inclusive attitudes. Therefore, in addition to expanding teachers' knowledge and professional skills, it is advisable to supplement training programs with components that raise awareness of, and provide strategies for regulating, emotions and prejudices toward others, as well as fostering empathy. In line with Levins et al. (2005), the research shows that individuals with lower levels of negative attitudes toward people with SEN held significantly more favorable views of inclusive practices and pedagogical principles.

Mediation analysis highlights the partial mediating role of the level of special education preparedness in the relationship between attitudes toward persons with SEN and inclusion. Practically, this suggests that increased special education preparedness may be indirectly related to changes in attitudes, potentially reducing negative emotional attitudes toward otherness and promoting a stronger supportive attitude toward inclusion. These results support previous findings (Cate et al., 2018; Razalli et al., 2021), which emphasize the key role of special education, methodological, and didactic competencies in successful cooperation with highly diverse student groups.

## 6. Conclusions

The practical implications of these findings are relevant to the organization of teacher training programs. It appears that during teacher preparation, it

may be beneficial to place greater emphasis on the targeted integration of differentiated teaching practices, methodological elements, and adapted educational strategies for students with SEN. The impact of this can be assessed not only in terms of the expansion of professional competencies but also in terms of fostering a more positive attitude toward diversity and inclusive education.

### Authors note:

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