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## **The Study of Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Practice: The Case of Russia**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the present study was to investigate the attitudes of teachers and school administration towards inclusion. A distinctive feature of this study is the gradual increase in the number of its members as a result of the annual increase in the number of inclusive schools that was also reflected in the qualitative composition of the sample. The study was conducted with the use of a questionnaire distributed among teachers and school administration. The article presents the results of a 3-year study, which made it possible to track changes in their attitudes towards inclusive education.

Results show that in general all the participants have a positive attitude towards inclusion. However, there is a difference between the groups of teachers and administrators, as well as the groups of teachers in rural and urban schools.

*Keywords: teachers, attitudes, inclusive education, administrators, Russia*

### **Introduction**

One of the directions of education modernization today is to ensure the rights for access to quality education, integration into society through inclusion in the general education space of children with disabilities. 'Inclusion in education means full inclusion of children with diverse abilities in all aspects of schooling that other

children are able to access and enjoy. It involves 'regular' schools and classrooms genuinely adapting and changing to meet the needs of all children as well as celebrating and valuing differences' (Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey, 2005, p.2).

Inclusive education in Russia is one of the main options for the right to education for children with disabilities enshrined in the Federal Law 'On Education in the Russian Federation' (2012) and in a number of other federal government documents. Systemic changes in the educational process of the schools where children with developmental problems are involved in joint training with their healthy peers are suggested.

This study is part of a larger project. The regional project titled 'Education and socialization of children with disabilities in inclusive educational space' was launched in the Novosibirsk region, Russia, in September 2011. The aim of the project was to increase access to quality education for children with disabilities. The project involves voluntary accession of schools in inclusive practice. 35 schools (8 urban and 27 rural) participated in the project in 2013, 108 schools (35 urban and 73 rural) – in 2014, 110 schools (17 urban and 93 rural) – in 2015.

Along with the implementation of the project, there was ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of the inclusive education process. One of the main parameters of the study was related to inclusive education practices by teachers, administration, parents and children. In this article, we would like to consider in more detail the dynamics of change in the attitude of teachers towards inclusion throughout 3 years (2013, 2014, and 2015).

The specifics of the field of educational space are the predominance of the number of rural schools over urban ones. Rural schools differ from urban ones in a small number of pupils (maximum 150 people), in territorial remoteness of special schools from the centers of methodological support for teachers, as well as the shortage of professionals to carry out psychological and pedagogical support for children.

Analysis of the studies published in international scientific journals from 1998 to 2008 revealed that teachers had a neutral or negative attitude toward inclusion, and showed no clear positive results. Most teachers either did not define or were negative in their beliefs about inclusive education and did not consider themselves well prepared for the education of children with special educational needs. 6 out of 26 studies showed that teachers did not feel competent in teaching children with special educational needs (Anke de Boer, Sip Jan Pijl & Alexander Minnaert, 2011).

Among the variables that affect the attitudes of teachers to inclusive education researchers included:

1. The teacher's gender. Men have a less positive attitude towards inclusive education (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004; Ellins & Porter, 2005). Women are more supportive of inclusion (Opdal, Wormnaes & Habayeb, 2001, Specht et al. 2016). However, there are studies that found no relationship between inclusion and teachers' gender (Chiner & Cardona, 2013).
2. Work experience. Teachers with 1 to 10 years of teaching experience are more positive to inclusive education than their counterparts with more experience (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004, Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape, 2013).
3. Experience of working with children with special educational needs. Most researchers say that teachers with experience in teaching children with SEN are more positive towards inclusion than teachers without such experience (Avramidis, E., & Kalyva, E., 2007; Peebles and Mendaglio, 2014; Specht et al., 2016).
4. Special training. A number of researchers believe that specialized training and professional development courses affect the improvement of attitudes towards inclusive education (Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman 2008, Forlin, 2010).
5. Type of disorder. The fewest teachers wanted to teach children with attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, behavioral disorders, mental disabilities (Alghazo & Naggar Gaad, 2004, Muwana & Octrosky, 2014). The teachers showed the greatest willingness towards teaching children with physical disabilities and sensory impairments (Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001, Muwana & Octrosky, 2014).

In this study, we determined the dependence of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education on a single variable – location of the school (urban or rural).

The purpose of this study was to determine the attitude of teachers and administrators of rural and urban schools in the Novosibirsk region, Russia, towards inclusion and trace its change over 3 years.

## **Methods**

The participants in this study were teachers – school teachers and administration working in inclusive schools in the Novosibirsk region of the Russian Federation.

31 urban schools and 80 rural school administrators, 202 urban schools and 424 rural school teachers took part in the study in 2013.

22 urban schools and 238 rural school administrators, 111 urban schools and 1,048 rural school teachers took part in the study in 2014

In 2015 the study was carried out in 2 stages. 68 urban school and 438 rural school administrators took part in the first stage. The second stage involved 88 administrators and 144 teachers in rural schools. Teachers in urban schools were not surveyed in 2015.

Identification of teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education was carried out with the use of questionnaires designed to identify acceptance or rejection of the inclusion of the educational process with a more detailed analysis of the nature of the participants' concerns and difficulties.

In 2013, 2014 and in the first phase in 2015, the study of the attitude to inclusion was carried out with the use of questionnaires designed by Chepel, Abakirova & Samuylenko (2013).

At the second stage of the study in 2015 a questionnaire called 'Indicators of inclusion,' adapted from Booth and Ainskow (2013), was applied. It allows for in-depth assessing of the attitude towards inclusion, the successes and difficulties of the formation of inclusion in each school and in the study sample as a whole. In adapting the questionnaires, the three main author scales (the creation of an inclusive culture, the creation of an inclusive culture, the creation of inclusive practices) were preserved, but the number of questions (13, 14, 10 respectively) was reduced by excluding the questions difficult to understand for teachers and administrators.

After processing the data obtained in the study, the rate of acceptance – rejection of inclusion in groups for rural and urban school teachers and administrators was defined. The following scale was applied:

- full acceptance: the percentage of the respondents who provided 80% of positive responses to the questionnaire at their lowest satisfaction with the existing school resources (human and material);
- conditional acceptance – the percentage of the respondents who gave more than 80% of positive responses to the questionnaire, with an average (31% – 65%), dissatisfaction with the existing resources for the implementation of inclusive practices;
- rejection – the percentage of the respondents who gave less than 80% of positive responses to the questionnaire, regardless of the resource satisfaction.

A rule of thumb was developed to evaluate the results of the study. If the level of complete and conditional acceptance in total is more than 70%, it can be concluded that the group has a positive attitude towards inclusive education. A group demonstrates a neutral attitude if the level of full conditional decision is in total

between 30 and 70%. And the results are assessed as negative if the sum of the full and conditional acceptance is below 30%.

## Results

**Result 1.** In 2013, the administrators of rural and urban schools as well as the teachers of rural schools demonstrated a positive attitude towards inclusive education. The teachers in urban schools showed a neutral attitude (cf., Figure 1).

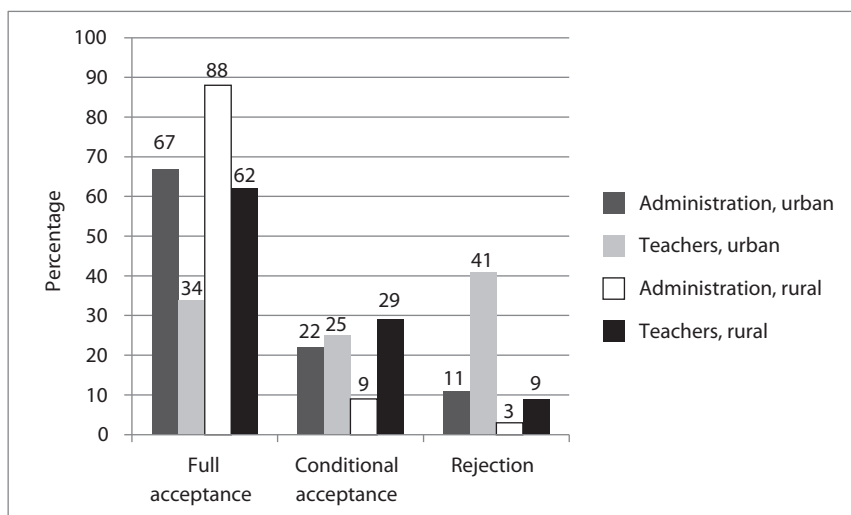


Figure 1. Inclusion acceptance rate of the administrators and teachers in 2013

The sum of the indicators of full and conditional acceptance of the administrators of urban schools was 89%, the rural school administrators – 97%, the teachers in rural schools – 91%, and the teachers in urban schools – 59%.

The school administrators had a higher acceptance rate of inclusion than the teachers.

The teachers in rural schools demonstrated a higher level of acceptance of inclusion than those in urban.

**Result 2.** All the participants demonstrated a positive attitude to inclusive education in 2014 (cf., Figure 2).

The sum of the indicators of full and conditional acceptance by the urban school administrators was 93%, the rural school administrators – 97%, the rural school teachers 99%, and the urban school teachers – 70%.

A drastic difference in the acceptance of inclusion in the attitudes of the school administration and teachers was proved again. Furthermore, a notable difference can be followed according to the same indicator of the administrators of urban (52% of full acceptance) and rural schools (83% of full acceptance).

The rural school teachers demonstrated the highest level of inclusive education acceptance (88 % of full acceptance).

The attitude of the urban schools to inclusive education improved compared to the indicators of 2013, however, their indicators were still lower than those of the rural school teachers.

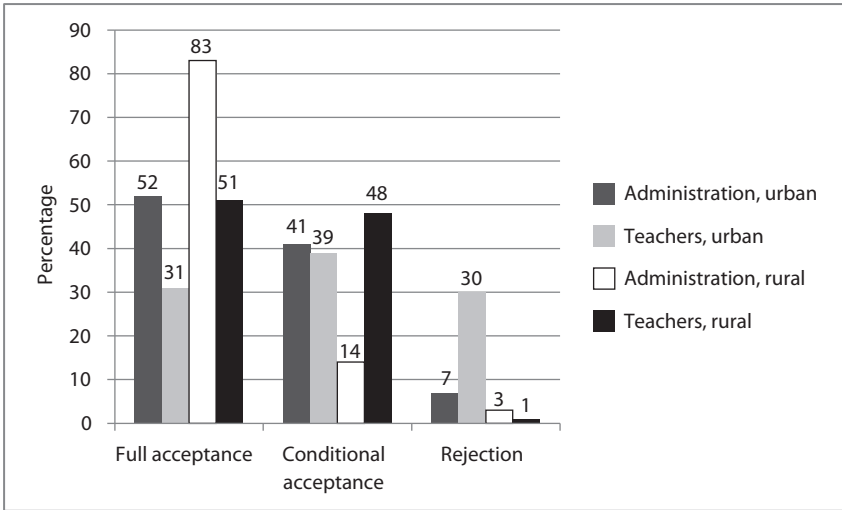


Figure 2. Inclusion acceptance rate of the administrators and teachers in 2014

**Result 3.** At the 2 stages of 2015, fairly high rates of inclusion acceptance among all the participants were observed (cf., Figures 3 and 4). The teachers of rural schools, the administrators of urban and rural schools demonstrated a positive attitude towards inclusive education. The teachers in urban schools were not surveyed.

The sum of the indicators of full and conditional acceptance of inclusion in the first phase among the administrators of urban schools was 93%, of the rural school administrators – 94%.

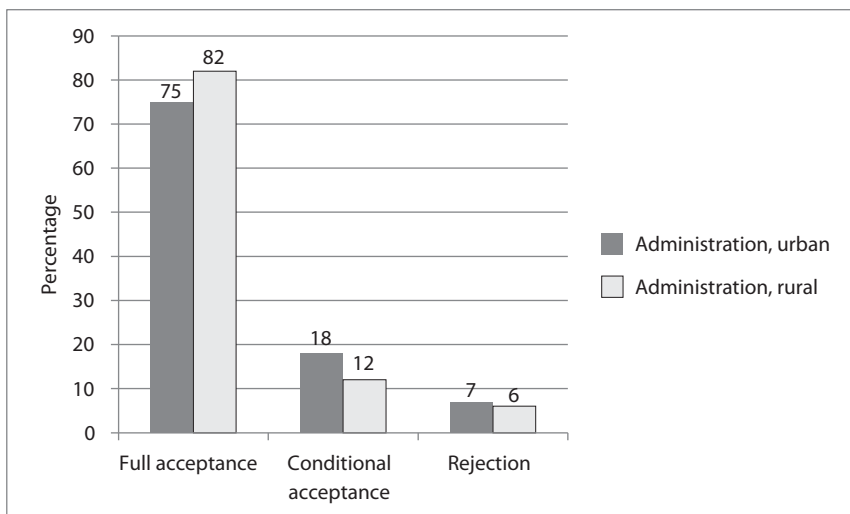


Figure 3. Inclusion acceptance rate of the administrators at the first stage of 2015

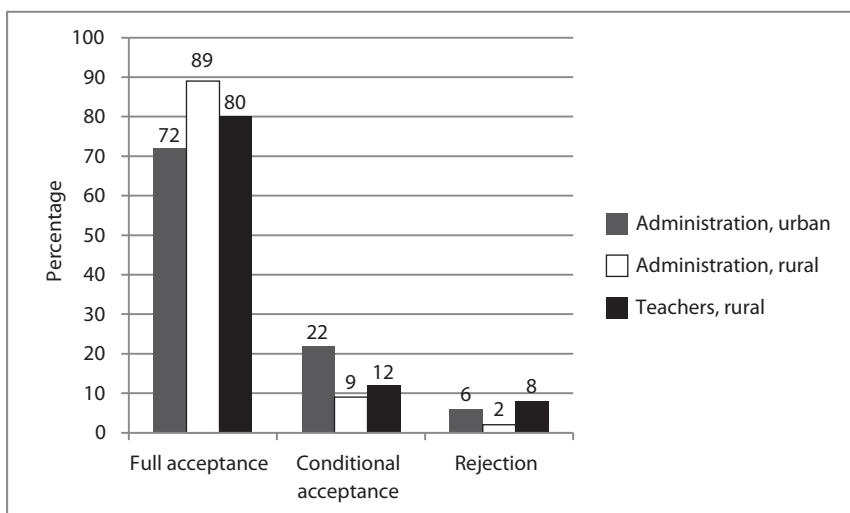


Figure 4. Inclusion acceptance rate of the administrators and teachers at the second stage of 2015

The sum of the indicators of full and conditional acceptance of inclusion in the second phase among the administrators of urban schools was 94%, of the rural school administrators – 98%, of the rural school teachers – 92%.

There was an increase in the inclusion rejection level among the teachers of rural schools compared to 2014 (2013–9%, 2014–1%, 2015–8%).

## **Summary**

Analyzing the dynamics of changes in 2013–2015, we can see a higher level of inclusion acceptance among the administrators and teachers in rural areas compared to their counterparts in urban schools.

Over the years, the school administrators had a higher acceptance rate of inclusion than the teachers.

Analysis of the number of the rural and urban schools that voluntarily joined the project over the period 2011–2014 and took part in the monitoring of the effectiveness of the inclusive education process shows that the rural schools are more interested in inclusion development, including the evaluation of the effectiveness of the inclusive education process.

The teachers in rural schools demonstrate a higher level of acceptance of inclusion than those in urban schools.

This can be explained by the specifics of rural society and rural schools. Rural society is more united, due to the uniqueness of life and living conditions of the rural population: people know each other well, actions, words and deeds become known by others. The teachers and school administrators feel increased social control over their professional activities and as the results of other research methods (conversation, the texts of public speeches) show, they are more tolerant towards children with disabilities.

Indicators of inclusion acceptance may temporarily fall under the influence of a number of factors. We can enumerate those whose indication was most frequently encountered in the surveys, in conversations, interviews and in written reports and the reports of the administrators and teachers of inclusive schools.

The first factor is deepening of the representations of the teachers and administrators about the essence of inclusion, which led to increased demand for the quality of the teachers' own professional activity and to the quality of teaching activities of the administrators.

The second is deepening of the practice of inclusion in schools which are starting to include children with more complex developmental disorders (ASD,



ADHD, learning disabilities) and facing more complex didactic problems in the educational process. This not only increases the time and emotional costs of the teachers to prepare for lessons, but also leads to some disappointment and reduces the positive assessment of the scope of this practice.

The third factor is the specificity of the educational situation in Russia as a whole in recent years. It can be described as the process of strengthening the state regulation of the quality and availability of education for children with disabilities. This is a positive process, and in the future it should lead to the development of inclusion, to improve the working conditions of teachers and administrators, to the essential results of inclusive education, which determine its very necessity. But against the lack of elaboration of federal regulatory documents and a somewhat shallow understanding of the essence of inclusion as an innovative educational practice in the control structures, this process is often manifested as a gain of formal control and supervision. Such actions destabilize the psychological condition of teachers, even those who share the principles of inclusion, but consider it as injustice.

The teachers in urban schools are still not convinced of the possibility and expediency of the joint education of children with disabilities in the general education environment. They showed 41% of rejection of inclusion in 2013 and 30% in 2014. In addition to the above factors, it contributes to an understanding of the existence of alternatives to inclusive education – special schools that are successful in the training and education of children in this category.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The dynamics of the school administrators' attitudes towards inclusion is different from the dynamics of those of the teachers and a direct relationship between these processes is not observed.

The attitude of the participants in the educational process towards the inclusive practice in terms of its design is characterized by stable positive trends in the group of school administrators and positive, but ambiguous changes in the group of teachers.

Having the background of immersion of teachers in the practice of including children with disabilities in mainstream education may cause a slight decrease in the degree of the acceptance of inclusion. The findings of Agbenyega & Klibthong (2014) also demonstrate strong evidence of the difficulties of working in inclusive schools. They note that some teachers are frustrated and stressed when working

with children with disabilities, especially with sensory impairments, autism and challenging behavior problems. Faced with problems, some teachers prefer special schools for children with disabilities.

The most problematic field of inclusive practice is the attitude of teachers towards the very possibility and the need to include children with disabilities in the general education space (Ryapisova & Chepel, 2013; Chepel, Abakirova & Samuylenko, 2014)

The study by Thaver & Lim (2014) identified a small group of teachers who have a dual attitude towards inclusion; supporting the idea of inclusion, they believe that children with special educational needs will obtain better education in a special school. This view is also the case in our study. In particular, this is true and is expressed in the group of urban teachers.

Our study confirms the results of international research on the presence of a complex mixture of positive attitudes towards inclusion, combined with fears and perceived inconsistencies, which is a fairly common practice in inclusive education (Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013).

The socio-cultural situation, belonging to urban or rural society is an important factor of influence on the attitude of teachers towards inclusion. The activity and success of schools in the development of inclusive practice reveal themselves as the most important conditions in the formation of teachers' positive attitudes to co-education of children.

In the context of the territorial remoteness of rural schools from the centers of methodological support for inclusive education, one of the important factors of a positive influence on the attitudes of teachers and administrators to inclusion can become a network model of their interaction.

The network model allows inclusive schools to provide assistance to each other with the deficit of professionals providing special support to children with disabilities and their teachers. Many researchers have also noted the need for teamwork in the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs in a holistic pedagogical process (Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011; Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014; Sukbunpant, Arthur-Kelly, & Dempsey 2013).

It should be noted that there is a limitation to this research. A subjective attitude of Russian teachers to inclusion was found as the study was based on self-assessment.

We consider it possible to trace the influence on and the important attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education in the successful socialization of students, the dynamics of the educational achievements of students that lead to the historical data of large-scale monitoring studies in the schools of the Novosibirsk region. We believe that this may be the subject of future studies and publications.

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