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Review article

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English Language Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

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Extended summary

The paper studies the attitudes of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) towards inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in Serbian mainstream schools. The primary focus of the study was to determine the EFL teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education (IE) and to identify the factors lying behind them. The participants were 96 primary teachers of English drawn from three geographically different regions of the country. The participants had diverse experience in teaching inclusive EFL classes, two thirds of the respondents being in the first half of the teaching career, with substantial teaching experience. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire (adapted from O'Gorman and Drudy, 2011), with both close-ended and open-ended questions related to the participants' specific experience in IE, the type and scope of institutional support they get at school, their professional development needs in IE, and their attitudes to IE.

According to the obtained data, the research sample reported social behavioural problems as the most frequently encountered in their teaching contexts (53.13%), while speech and language difficulty (46.88%), AD(H)D (44.79%), and gifted and talented (40.63%) were also identified among the most frequently present needs; high frequency was reported for emotionally disturbed (35.42%), specific learning difficulties (30.21%), physical impairments (28.13%), and dyslexia (26.04%), while visually impaired (20.83%), autism/Aspergers (19.79%), hearing

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impaired (17.71%) and psychological needs (15.67%) were less frequently reported by the respondents; the least frequent were dyscalculia (2.08%), dyspraxia (5.21%), multi-sensory impairment (6.25%) and Down syndrome (7.21%).

The results showed that most of the respondents (N = 84, i.e. 87.50%) expressed negative attitudes towards inclusion, and reported mainly the following two underlying reasons: 1. the lack of professional competences; and, 2. the absence of adequate conditions for successful inclusive practice. Only 29.16% of the respondents claimed they had been specially trained to teach SEN children, and a great majority (N = 89, i.e. 92.7%) expressed their concerns related to a number of challenges they faced in daily work. As much as the participants expressed requests for professional development in IE and improvement of their knowledge and skills, they also requested much more support and better conditions for implementing inclusion. In reference to support that was available in school, the availability of SEN teams in school was reported by 69.79% (N = 67) respondents, but most of the participants claimed that the teams met irregularly and provided support that was not helpful for their daily IE teaching practice. Significantly, the participants who found the support they received in their teaching contexts useful and valuable emphasized the important role that peer support played in their IE experience. Only 27.08% of the respondents reported having a classroom assistant available in school, indicating thus a major lack in the IE teaching conditions.

The results related to the needs for improving the IE teaching conditions showed that the respondents believed a classroom assistant was a significant factor for making IE effective, but also that cooperation with a psychologist, special teacher and parents was of great importance. Moreover, the participants claimed that enhanced institutional support was needed in providing technology and assistive aids, as well as physical conditions for SEN children. Considering the fact that teachers are the key to supporting the process of inclusion, and that positive attitude is a predictor of success in IE, there are important implications of these results for IE practice in Serbia. First, pre-service and in-service education of EFL teachers should provide more training in IE. Second, the conditions in our schools should be improved to meet the needs of all children and to respond to the corresponding needs expressed by the participants in the study. Such changes can contribute to altering the negative attitudes towards inclusion expressed by a great majority of the EFL teachers who participated in the study.

Key words: teaching English as a foreign language, inclusion in mainstream primary schools, teacher competences, professional development, teaching conditions.

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