

How Teachers' Backgrounds Shape their Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education

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Abstract

*This study examines the attitudes of preschool and primary school teachers in Romania toward the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream educational settings. Drawing on a sample of 50 educators from both urban and rural environments, the research explores how teachers understand, perceive, and apply the principles of inclusive education, with particular attention to the influence of their socio educational background. A 21 item questionnaire was developed to assess teachers' familiarity with inclusive practices, their willingness to implement them, and the perceived challenges associated with inclusion. Descriptive analyses were conducted for the first set of items, while inferential statistics—specifically the Student's *t* test—were used to compare attitudes across urban and rural groups. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors shaping teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and to support the development of more effective educational policies and practices that promote equity, participation, and meaningful learning opportunities for all children.*

Keywords

Inclusive education, teachers' attitudes, urban–rural differences, mainstream schooling, educational inclusion practices.

Introduction

In contemporary Romania, inclusive education remains a topic marked by persistent questions and significant challenges (Gherguț, 2010, p. 712). Despite a supportive legislative framework and international commitments that uphold every child's right to quality education, school-level realities reveal that the concept is still poorly understood and inconsistently implemented. Children with special educational needs continue to face

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labeling, marginalization, and even exclusion, often being perceived by educational stakeholders as an added burden (Demetriou, 2022).

The implementation of inclusive education in schools is deeply connected to the broader societal attitudes toward diversity and social change. An inclusive school goes beyond merely placing students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms; it requires a genuine transformation of the educational environment to meet their needs (Barth, Marușca & Țepelea, 2025). This includes individualized learning plans, specialized support services, curricular flexibility, and a substantial reorganization of instructional practices (Barth & Florescu, 2016).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) asserts that the core principle of inclusive schooling is that all children should learn together whenever possible, regardless of their difficulties or differences (Florin, 2019). In this perspective, inclusive education is defined by several key dimensions: acknowledging that all children are capable of learning, identifying and reducing barriers to participation, adapting curricula and teaching strategies to student diversity, and continuously refining educational practices in response to cultural and social contexts (Barth, Florescu & Ciobanu, 2019).

In the academic literature, inclusion is understood as a process through which every individual—regardless of their difficulties—is recognized as a full member of society and provided with appropriate educational, social, and medical support (Popovici, 1999). Within this perspective, inclusive education emerges as a cornerstone of a democratic society committed to equity and active participation. In the current national context, inclusive education carries the responsibility of safeguarding every child's right to quality education, free from discrimination (deBeco, 2022). Fulfilling this mandate requires the consistent application of key principles such as equal opportunities, non-discrimination, early intervention, and child-centered approaches. It also entails the development of an inclusive pedagogy marked by diversity, flexibility, and a focus on each learner's progress. Equally important is the existence of a coherent system of support services—psychological, social, medical, and educational—which plays a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusion (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2002).

At its core, inclusive education seeks to remove the barriers that hinder school and social participation, with particular attention to children who are vulnerable or at risk of marginalization. Its overarching goal is to reframe diversity as a valuable resource rather than an impediment, fostering an environment in which both teachers and students view differences as opportunities for learning and growth (Tanasijvic,

Škorić&Nijemčević Popovski, 2025). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine Romanian teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education—an essential factor in the success of any inclusion effort. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions play a decisive role in how inclusion principles are enacted in everyday practice, and understanding these attitudes is a crucial step toward enhancing educational policies and improving classroom practices.

Research Purpose

This study seeks to examine the attitudes of teachers working in mainstream schools and kindergartens in Romania toward inclusive education. Addressing a timely and highly relevant issue within the national educational landscape, the research explores how teachers understand and implement inclusive education principles, taking into account their socio-educational background (urban vs. rural) and their professional teaching rank. A key aim of the study is to evaluate teachers' familiarity with the concept of inclusive/integrated education and its practical implications for classroom practice.

Research Objectives

General Objective: To investigate teachers' perceptions and attitudes regarding the implementation of inclusive education in Romania.

Specific Objectives:

- To analyze the attitudes of teachers working in urban settings toward the implementation of inclusive education in schools and kindergartens.
- To analyze the attitudes of teachers working in rural settings toward the implementation of inclusive education in schools and kindergartens.
- To conduct a comparative analysis of urban and rural teachers' perceptions and their willingness to apply inclusive education principles in Romania.

Participants

The study involved a total of 50 participants, consisting of preschool and primary school teachers working in mainstream educational settings. The sample included educators from both urban and rural environments. The distribution of participants by educational level and background is presented in the table below.

Table 1: Distribution of participants.

<i>Educational level</i>	<i>URBAN</i>	<i>RURAL</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>Primary education</i>	14	13	27
<i>Preschool education</i>	11	12	23
<i>TOTAL</i>	25	25	50

(Source: INSCOP Research, January 2026)

Instruments

The primary research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire. To assess teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schools and kindergartens, a 21-item questionnaire with predefined response options was developed. The instrument comprised two categories of items:

- the first 11 items were examined using descriptive statistical methods, based on graphical representations and comparative analyses;
- the remaining 10 items were analyzed through inferential statistics, employing the Student's t-test to compare mean scores between groups. Items were rated on a five-point scale (a=1, b=2, c=3, d=4, e=5). The scores of the 10 attitude-related items were summed to generate a composite score, with higher values indicating a more positive attitude toward inclusive education.

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered to all 50 participants, consisting of preschool and primary school teachers. Respondents were instructed to answer the items honestly, and confidentiality of their responses was ensured. The instrument was distributed in both printed and electronic formats.

Research Hypothesis

H₁: It is hypothesized that teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in Romania differ according to their socio-educational background (urban vs. rural).

- Independent Variable (IV): background
 - Urban
 - Rural
- Dependent Variable (DV): teachers' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in Romania.

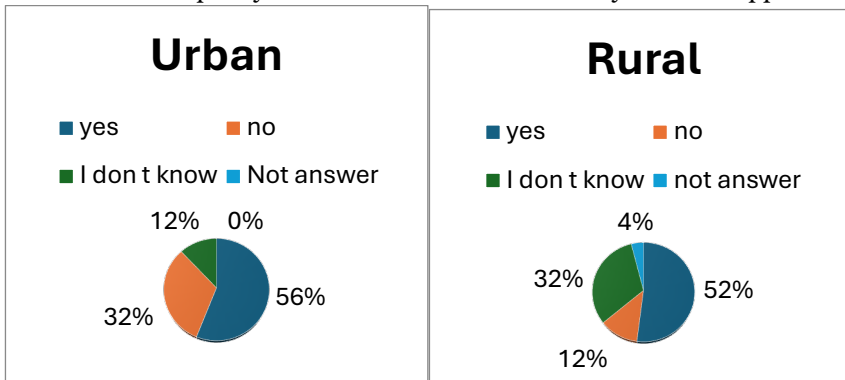
The study employs a one-factor experimental design, incorporating a single independent variable.

Results analysis and interpretation

In the second stage of the analysis, each item was examined using graphical statistics, allowing us to explore the data in relation to the research hypothesis.

The analysis of responses to the first item shows that teachers generally perceive the current structure of the Romanian education system as supportive of inclusive education. A slight difference emerged between the two groups: 56% of urban teachers and 54% of rural teachers believe that the system allows for the implementation of inclusive practices. However, urban respondents expressed more reservations, with 32% indicating that the system does not support inclusion, compared to 12% in rural areas. Uncertainty was considerably higher among rural teachers, where 33% reported not knowing whether the system enables inclusive education, in contrast to 12% in urban settings. This suggests lower conceptual familiarity with inclusion in rural environments. Overall, the data indicate that most teachers consider the current educational framework conducive to inclusive education, although levels of confidence and understanding vary by background.

Figure 1: Perceived capacity of the Romanian education system to support inclusion.

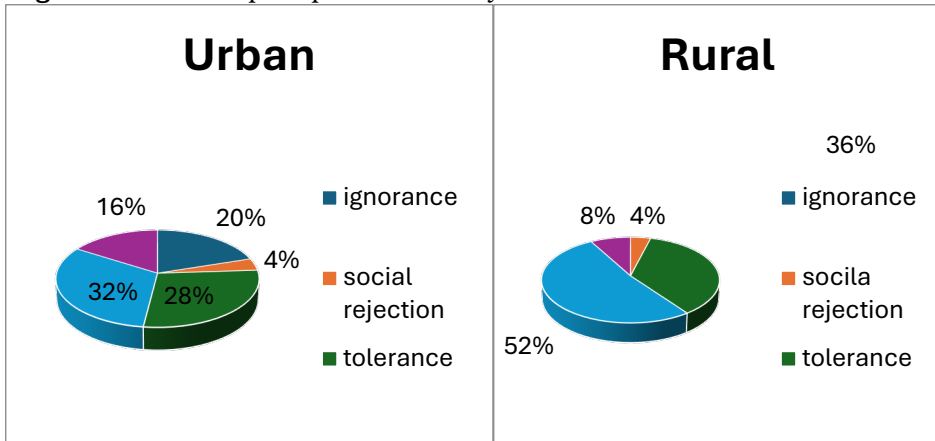


(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The second item explored teachers' perceptions of society's general attitude toward children with special educational needs (SEN). The results reveal a clear tendency toward acceptance, though with notable differences between urban and rural respondents. Teachers from rural areas were more likely to perceive society as accepting, with 48% selecting this option, compared to 35% of urban teachers. Perceptions of societal tolerance were relatively similar across groups (33% rural; 30% urban). Supportive attitudes were also acknowledged, though at lower levels (16% urban; 15%

rural). A small proportion of respondents (4%) identified social rejection as a prevailing attitude, while 20% of urban teachers perceived societal indifference toward children with SEN. Overall, the findings suggest that teachers generally view society’s stance toward children with SEN as predominantly accepting or tolerant, indicating a gradual shift toward openness and social inclusion.

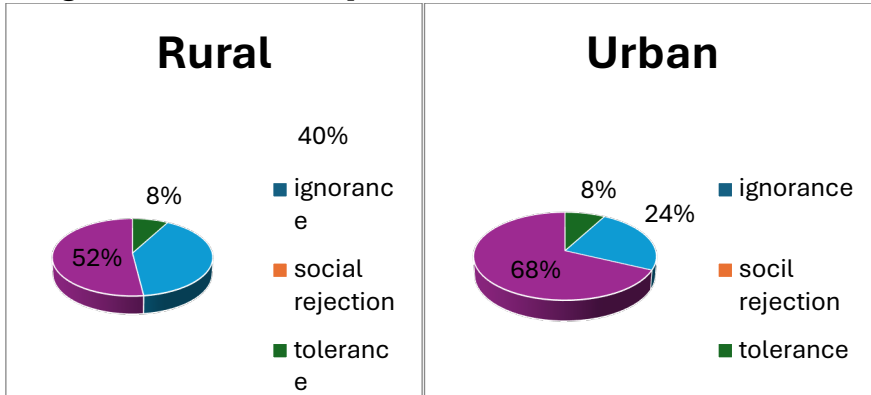
Figure 2: Teachers’ perceptions of society’s attitude toward children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The third item examined teachers’ personal attitudes toward children with special educational needs (SEN), allowing for comparison with their previously reported perceptions of societal attitudes. The results reveal notable differences between the two groups. Teachers from rural areas reported predominantly supportive attitudes, with 68% indicating a supportive stance and 63% expressing acceptance. In contrast, urban teachers reported higher levels of acceptance (24%) but lower levels of support (25%), suggesting a more reserved but still positive orientation. Tolerance was reported at relatively low levels in both groups (12% urban; 8% rural), and no respondents indicated negative attitudes. Overall, the findings show that teachers tend to express more positive personal attitudes toward children with SEN than those they attribute to society, indicating a higher level of professional openness and willingness to engage with inclusive practices.

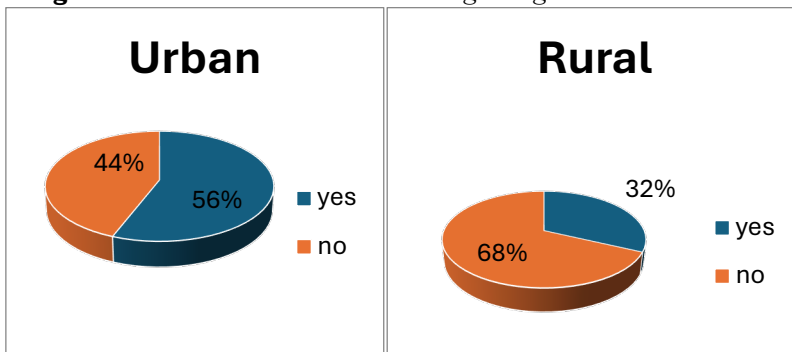
Figure 3: Teachers' self-reported attitudes toward children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The fourth item examined whether teachers currently work with students with special educational needs (SEN). The results show a clear contrast between the two environments. In urban settings, 56% of teachers reported having SEN students in their classrooms, indicating more frequent exposure to inclusive practices. In rural areas, however, the situation is reversed: 65% of teachers reported not having SEN students, while only 35% work with such students. These findings suggest that urban teachers are more familiar with inclusive education, likely due to greater exposure to diverse student populations and more frequent integration of SEN students in mainstream settings.

Figure 4: Distribution of classes integrating students with SEN.

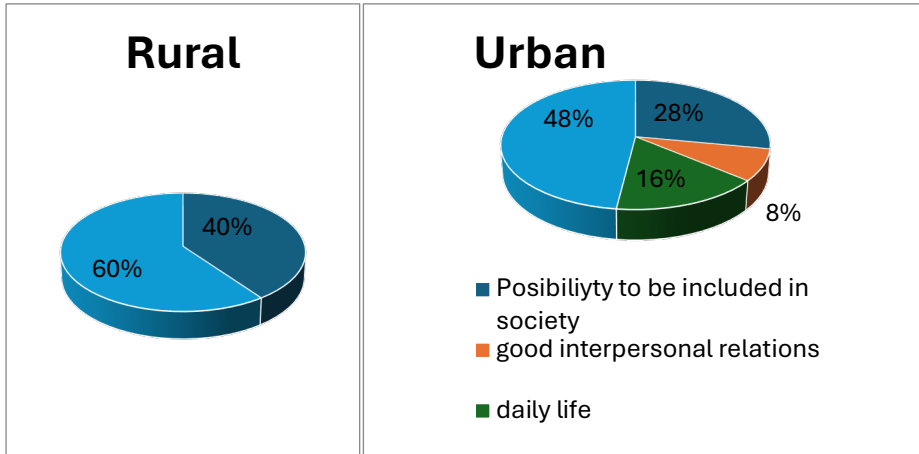


(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The fifth item explored teachers' perceptions of why families choose mainstream schools for children with SEN. Across both groups, the dominant reason identified was the right to equal opportunities, followed by the possibility of social integration. Urban teachers selected only these two options, with 68% citing equal opportunities and 32% social integration. Rural teachers offered a more diverse set of responses: 48% equal opportunities, 28% social integration, 16% assimilation of everyday life

routines, and 8% the development of appropriate interpersonal relationships. Overall, the results indicate that teachers recognize multiple valid motivations for mainstream placement, reflecting an understanding of inclusion as both a rights-based and socially beneficial approach.

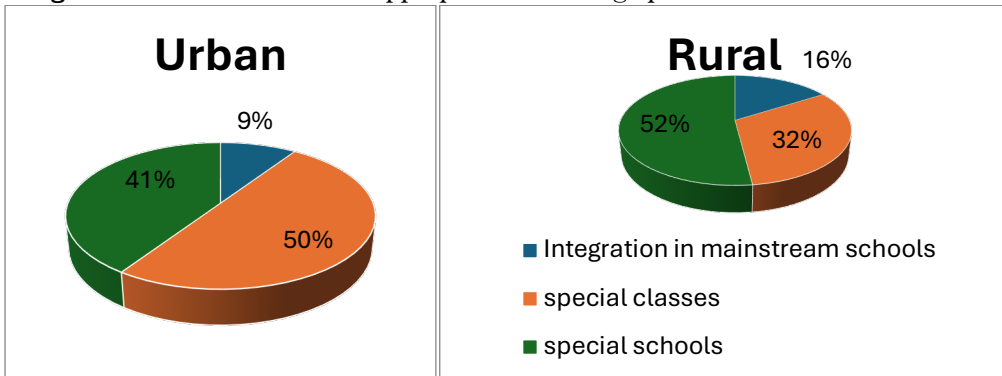
Figure 5. Teachers’ perceptions of the reasons parents choose mainstream schooling for children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The sixth item assessed teachers’ views on the most appropriate schooling arrangements for children with SEN. Responses varied considerably between the two groups. Urban teachers most frequently supported special classes within mainstream schools (50%), followed by special schools depending on the case (41%), and only 9% favored full integration in regular classes. In rural areas, the preferred option was special schools depending on the case (52%), followed by special classes in mainstream schools (32%), and 16% supported full integration. These results suggest that teachers tend to favor partial or conditional inclusion, with full mainstream integration receiving limited support, particularly in rural settings.

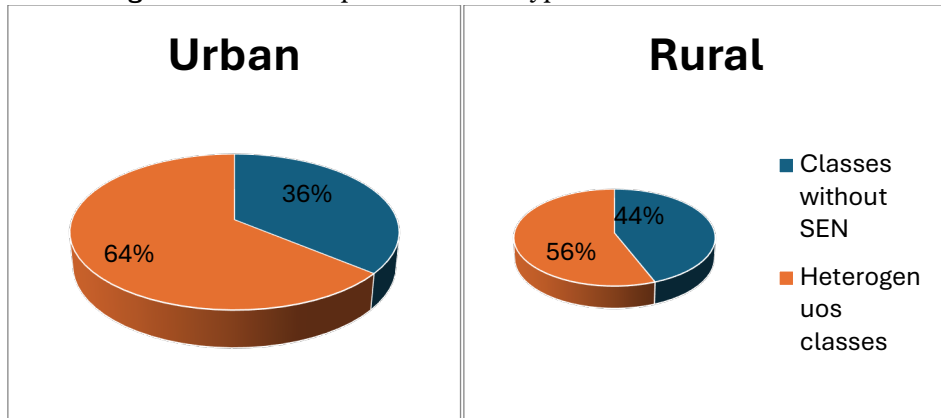
Figure 6. Teachers’ views on appropriate schooling options for children with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The seventh item explored teachers' willingness to work in heterogeneous (inclusive) classrooms. The majority of respondents from both environments expressed openness to working with diverse groups. In urban areas, 64% preferred heterogeneous classes, while 34% preferred classes without SEN students. In rural areas, 56% opted for heterogeneous groups, whereas 44% preferred non-inclusive classes. These findings indicate that urban teachers show slightly greater openness toward inclusive teaching, possibly reflecting higher levels of experience and familiarity with SEN students.

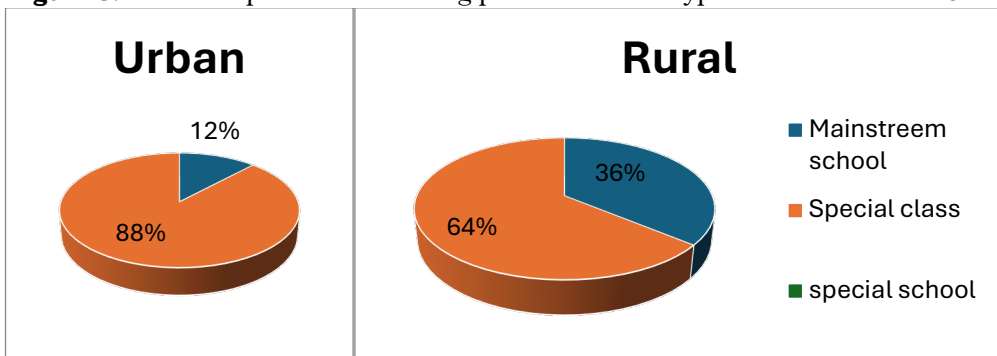
Figure 7. Teachers' preferred class types for instructional work.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The eighth item investigated teachers' personal preferences regarding the schooling of a hypothetical child with SEN. Most respondents from both environments indicated that they would choose a special class within a mainstream school. This option was selected by 88% of urban teachers and 64% of rural teachers. Only 12% of urban and 36% of rural respondents would choose a regular mainstream class. These results highlight a preference for partial inclusion supported by specialized staff, suggesting that teachers value the combination of mainstream integration and targeted support.

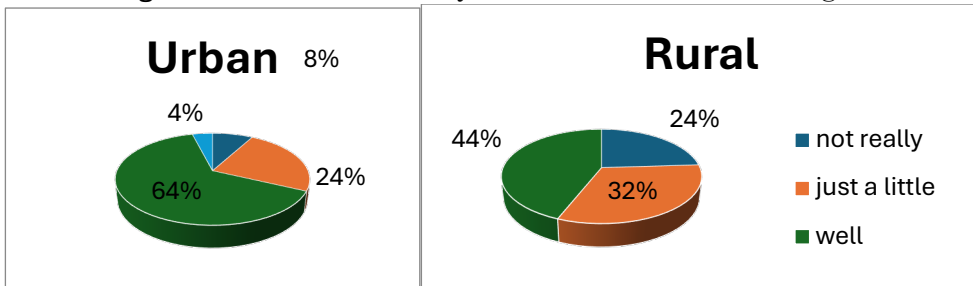
Figure 8. Teachers' preferred schooling placement for a hypothetical child with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The ninth item assessed teachers’ self-reported familiarity with instructional strategies for working with SEN students. Urban teachers reported higher levels of familiarity, with 64% indicating a high level and 4% a very high level. However, 24% reported low familiarity, and 8% very low familiarity. In rural areas, only 44% reported high familiarity, while 32% indicated low familiarity and 24% very low familiarity. These results point to a clear need for additional professional development, particularly among rural teachers, who report significantly lower levels of preparedness for inclusive instruction.

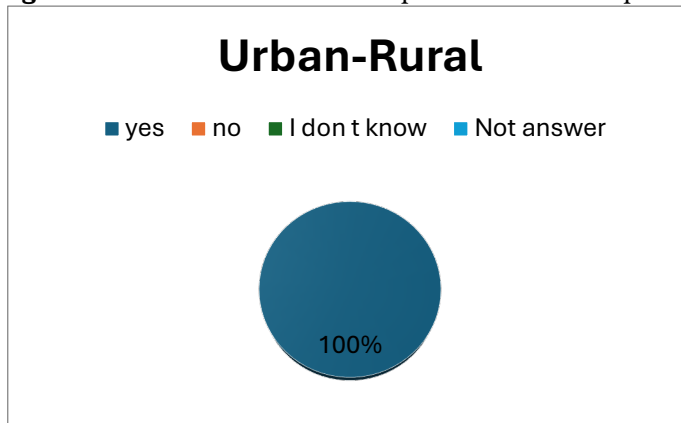
Figure 9. Teachers’ familiarity with SEN instructional strategies.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The tenth item examined teachers’ views on the importance of continuous professional development in the context of upcoming educational reforms. All respondents—100% in both urban and rural areas—considered ongoing training essential. This unanimous agreement underscores teachers’ recognition of the need for continuous learning to adapt to evolving educational demands and to effectively support inclusive practices.

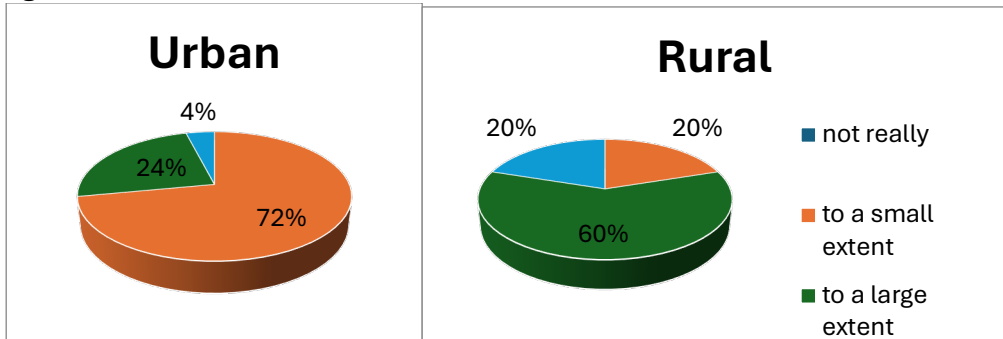
Figure 10. Interest in continuous professional development.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

The final item explored the extent to which teachers perceive inclusive education as a source of additional stress. Urban teachers generally reported lower stress levels: 72% indicated low stress, 24% high stress, and 4% very high stress. In contrast, rural teachers reported higher stress levels: 60% high stress, 20% very high stress, and 20% low stress. These findings suggest that rural teachers experience greater strain related to inclusive education, likely due to limited training, fewer resources, and lower familiarity with SEN instructional strategies.

Figure 11. Perceived stress associated with inclusive education for students with SEN.



(Source: own drawing with based on the collected dates)

Subsequently, an independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in teachers' attitudes based on their area of residence, and the descriptive statistics are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Descriptive Statistics

	attitudine cadre didactice	
	rural	urban
Valid	25	25
Missing	0	0
Mean	36.520	37.240
Std. Deviation	2.756	2.570
Minimum	31.000	33.000
Maximum	41.000	42.000

In the table above, we can observe that there is no major difference between the attitudes of teachers from urban areas and those from rural areas. The mean score for rural respondents is 36.520, while the mean score for urban respondents is 37.240. The table also shows that the lowest score recorded among rural participants is 31 points, compared to 33 points

among urban participants. Similarly, the maximum scores are close: 41 points for rural respondents and 42 points for those from urban areas.

Tabel nr. 3: T Test

Independent Samples T-Test

	t	df	P
atitudine cadre didactice	-0.955	48.000	0.344

Note. Student's t-test.

Following the comparison of teachers' attitudes from rural and urban areas, the calculated t-value was -0.955 , with a corresponding significance level of $p = 0.344$, which is higher than the critical threshold of $p = 0.05$. Under these conditions, we can conclude that there are no significant differences between the attitudes of teachers from urban and rural environments included in the study. Therefore, based on the t-test results, the hypothesis is not confirmed, indicating that the area of residence does not influence respondents' attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education in their classes or groups.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream educational settings. Overall, the descriptive results indicate that teachers, regardless of their area of residence, tend to hold relatively similar views regarding inclusive education. The mean scores for rural (36.520) and urban teachers (37.240) differ only slightly, and the minimum and maximum values recorded in both groups also show a high degree of overlap. These descriptive patterns already suggest a broadly comparable attitude profile across the two environments.

The inferential analysis further supports this observation. The independent samples t-test yielded a value of $t = -0.955$ with a significance level of $p = 0.344$, which exceeds the conventional threshold of $p = 0.05$. Consequently, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, indicating that there are no statistically significant differences between rural and urban teachers in terms of their attitudes toward the implementation of inclusive education. This result suggests that the area of residence does not play a determining role in shaping teachers' perceptions of the challenges or benefits associated with integrating students with SEN.

These findings align with recent literature emphasizing that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced more strongly by factors such as training, experience, and institutional support rather than geographical context. The relatively uniform attitudes observed in this study may also reflect broader national efforts to promote inclusive practices across all educational environments.

In conclusion, the results highlight the need for continued professional development opportunities that address inclusive methodologies for all teachers, irrespective of their school setting. Strengthening teachers' competencies and confidence in working with students with SEN remains essential for ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education at a systemic level.

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