



**EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' EMOTIONAL
INTELLIGENCE IN SHAPING ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS
AND CONCERNS ABOUT INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

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Abstract:

In physical education environments that embrace diversity, teachers' attitudes and concerns about inclusive education depend not only on the academic intelligence of those teaching but also on their emotional intelligence and maturity. Emotional awareness skills, understanding and managing the emotions of teachers themselves and their students facilitate a social justice perspective in education. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between physical education teachers' emotional intelligence and their attitudes, perceptions and concerns towards inclusion. It also tested whether demographic factors (gender, age, level of education, teaching experience and special education studies) influence both perceived emotional intelligence and attitudes towards inclusion. Finally, the study examined whether emotional intelligence can be a predictor of physical education teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and concerns for creating an inclusive school environment. The participants were 200 physical education teachers who responded on the (a) Wong & Law Emotional Intelligence Scale -WLEIS (Wong & Law, 2002) and (b) The Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale

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Revised [SACIE-R]) (Loreman, Earle, Sharma & Forlin, 2011). The Spearman correlation coefficient revealed a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and teachers' negative feelings and concerns about inclusive education. Teachers with high levels of emotional intelligence had fewer concerns about inclusion and harbour fewer negative feelings about people with disabilities. A moderately positive correlation of emotional literacy with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion was observed. The results also showed that female teachers, educators with many years of teaching experience, teachers with higher academic qualifications and those with specialized studies in special education have higher levels of emotional intelligence and more favourable attitudes towards inclusive physical education. In contrast, younger teachers, those with a basic degree and no training in adapted PE, show higher levels of concern regarding the success of the inclusive practices they adopt. Finally, specialized studies and training in special education were significant predictors of positive feelings towards inclusion and the reduction of teachers' concerns about the successful implementation of inclusive practices.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, attitudes, inclusive education, disability, PE teachers

1. Introduction

Teachers' sentiments, attitudes and concerns towards inclusion are considered key dimensions of inclusive education (Forlin *et al.*, 2011). Physical education teachers' beliefs significantly influence the adoption of an active lifestyle for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Positive beliefs towards the inclusion of SEND students are linked to the implementation of social justice in schools and the promotion of equitable access to physical activity opportunities for all children (Koutsovasili, Katsora & Kaprinis, 2024). Emotional intelligence appears to be a crucial and decisive factor in shaping attitudes, perceptions and concerns (Nwosu *et al.*, 2023). However, PE teachers, although generally possessing a high understanding of their personal emotions, tend not to understand their students' emotions to the same extent and do not use emotions positively to solve challenges (Adamakis & Roccliffe, 2019; Block & Obrusnikova, 2009). Therefore, investigating PE teachers' emotional intelligence in inclusive settings is of seminal importance given the diverse demands, challenges and pressures. The present research aims to investigate the role of emotional intelligence in shaping PE teachers' attitudes, perceptions and concerns towards inclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Intelligence in Education

The concept of emotional intelligence, as proposed in the Four-Branch of EI model, by Salovey and Mayer (1990) is a subset of social intelligence, comprising four fundamental abilities: perception, understanding, use and regulation of emotions. Goleman (1998)

defined emotional intelligence as an individual's ability to (a) recognize one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others, (b) motivate oneself, (c) manage personal emotions positively, and (d) manage interpersonal relationships positively. Bar-On (2013), described emotional intelligence as a set of interrelated emotional and social abilities, skills and behaviours that determine an individual's understanding, control and regulation of emotions to effectively cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures. Further, Bar-On (2013) suggested that within emotional intelligence, intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood with optimism coexist.

Teachers' emotional intelligence acts as a facilitator of inclusion as it enhances the perspective of social justice and equal opportunities in education (Barrantes-Elizondo, 2016; Koutsovasili *et al.*, 2024). Emotionally intelligent teachers better understand the diversity of an inclusive classroom, create a school climate that enhances social interactions, building positive relationships, student well-being, and learning itself (Alrup *et al.*, 2022; Skura & Swiderska, 2022; Zurita-Ortega *et al.*, 2020). Petsos and Gorozidis (2019) argued that physical education teachers who have well-developed emotional skills tend to better understand their students' emotions, have increased empathy, are caring and supportive, and exhibit fewer harsh behaviours. In the same context, Lee *et al.* (2019) reported that emotional intelligence allows PE teachers to detect and prevent undesirable behaviours early by demonstrating sensitive behaviours. In addition, emotional intelligence has been associated with increased teaching effectiveness (Katsora *et al.*, 2022; Kocoglu, 2011; Sahin 2017; Valente *et al.*, 2020; Voulgaraki *et al.*, 2023), as emotionally competent teachers feel able to adapt their teaching to the needs of SEND students, use optimal teaching strategies, promote social interaction and cohesion. Teachers' emotional maturity influences behaviour, students' attachment to learning and commitment to academic achievement (Turner & Stough, 2020).

In addition, teachers' emotional intelligence is positively associated with their intrapersonal and interpersonal professional well-being (Merida-Lopez & Extremera, 2017). Chesnut and Cullen (2014) found a significant positive association between emotional intelligence and teachers' commitment to their profession. Teachers with high levels of emotional intelligence develop greater resilience and a high degree of emotional stability in dealing with challenges and adversity in an inclusive classroom (Richards *et al.*, 2018; Vesely *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, emotionally intelligent teachers feel greater job satisfaction and are less likely to experience feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and burnout (Lee *et al.*, 2019; Puertas Molero *et al.*, 2019; Turner & Stough, 2020).

2.2 Physical Education Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Inclusive Education

There is a significant amount of research exploring the factors that influence and shape teachers' attitudes and inclusion practices. However, these studies find, from moderately

positive attitudes (Rekaa *et al.*, 2019) to negative attitudes (Block & Obrusnikova, 2009; Doulkeridou *et al.*, 2011; Jerlinder, Danermark & Gill, 2010), as teachers feel unprepared or lack confidence and find inclusion extremely problematic, if not impossible (Hersman & Hodge, 2010). For example, the type and severity of disability (Hutzler & Barak, 2017; Obrusnikova 2008; Wilhelmsen & Sorensen, 2017), class size and teacher-student ratio (Alves *et al.*, 2017) significantly influence the prospect of inclusion. Furthermore, teachers' level of knowledge and academic training are associated with more positive attitudes towards inclusive physical education (Hutzler & Barak, 2017; Ozer *et al.*, 2013; Qi *et al.*, 2017; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2015; Tindall *et al.*, 2016).

The absence of training increases concerns about effective classroom management (Wilhelmsen & Sorensen, 2017). Teaching experience has also been identified as a determinant in shaping positive attitudes, as less experienced teachers tend to maintain a more favourable attitude compared to their counterparts with more experience (Alves *et al.*, 2017; Ozer *et al.*, 2013). The finding can be explained by the fact that novice teachers do not need to modify established stereotypical patterns of exclusion while they have more opportunities to come into contact with inclusion practices and inclusive policies in both theory and practice. Another dimension that reduces stereotypical perceptions and biases is prior contact with SEND students, as it appears to shape a positive impact on attitudes (Obrusnikova, 2008; Ozer *et al.*, 2013). In addition, the degree of perceived teacher effectiveness is a predictor of positive attitudinal outcomes. Teachers with high self-efficacy feel able to teach in an inclusive environment and have more favourable attitudes (Bala 2021; Gkouvousi *et al.*, 2023; Ozokcu 2018; Hutzler, *et al.*, 2019; Yada *et al.*, 2022).

Conversely, teachers who are concerned about implementing inclusion are less likely to adopt behavioral inclusive practices by expressing hesitancy (Miesera *et al.*, 2019). Further, personality traits such as emotional intelligence and maturity appear to significantly shape attitudes, as emotionally intelligent teachers are more aware of their own emotions as well as those of their students, manage their emotional reactions effectively, adapt their teaching to the needs of SEND pupils, helping to create a positive and supportive learning climate (Gkouvousi *et al.*, 2023; Voulgaraki *et al.*, 2023). Other demographic variables, such as gender and age of teachers, reflect ambivalent views. For example, most studies show no effect of gender on attitudes (Block *et al.*, 2013; Hodge *et al.*, 2002; Kudlacek *et al.*, 2002; Ozer *et al.*, 2013), while some studies have shown more favourable attitudes toward women (Hutzler, Zach & Gafni, 2005). Furthermore, the majority of studies show no significant effect of age on the attitudes of physical education teachers (Tripp & Rizzo, 2006), while others find that younger teachers have more favourable attitudes towards diversity and inclusive education (Arias-Pastor *et al.*, 2023; Ozer *et al.*, 2013). Teachers with positive attitudes are more likely to implement inclusive practices, which in turn contribute to the development of social and academic skills of students with special education needs (Yang, Pang & Sin, 2024). Fully understanding PE teachers' feelings, attitudes and concerns about SEND children is of major importance in promoting inclusion (Wilhelmsen & Sorensen, 2017).

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Sample

The sample of the present study consisted of 200 physical education teachers, of which 77% (n = 154) were female and 23% (n = 46) were male. Regarding age, 32% (n = 64) of the teachers were 31-40 years old, 24.5% (n = 49) 41-50, 23.5% (n = 47) were below 30 years old and 20% (n = 40) 51 and above. In terms of educational level, 57% (n = 114) of the participants held a postgraduate degree, 35% (n = 70) held a bachelor's degree and 8% (n = 16) held a doctorate. Regarding length of service, 45% (n = 90) of teachers had been working 0-5 years, 23.5% (n = 47) over 20 years, 19% (n = 38) 6-10 years and 12.5% (n = 25) 11-20 years. In terms of level of education, 52% (n = 104) of teachers worked in primary education, while 48% (n = 96) worked in secondary education. In terms of employer, 80.5% (n = 161) of the respondents worked in a public school, while 19.5% (n = 39) worked in a private school. Regarding training in special education, 70.5% (n = 141) of the respondents had attended a relevant seminar/training programme, and 29.5% (n = 59) had no such experience. In terms of special education studies, 54.5% (n = 109) have conducted studies in this field, while 45.5% (n = 91) had no specialized studies.

3.2 Research Tools

For the purposes of the study, the (a) Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) (Wong & Law, 2002) and the (b) Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale Revised (SACIE-R) (Loreman, Earle, Sharma & Forlin 2011) were used. The reliability of the factors of each questionnaire was tested with the internal consistency index Cronbach's Alpha, with values greater than or equal to 0.7 being acceptable (McNeish, 2018; Taber, 2018). The results showed adequate reliability indicators on all factors of the Wong, Law Emotional Intelligence Scale: (i) self-emotional appraisal (a = 0.84), (ii) others' emotional appraisal (a = 0.81), (iii) use of emotions (a = 0.81) and (iv) regulation of emotions (a = 0.88). The overall Emotional intelligence scale showed a high Cronbach Alpha (a = 0.92). In the SACIE-R questionnaire, the reliability analysis showed sufficient findings for "attitudes" (a = 0.85), "sentiments" (a = 0.76) and "concerns" (a = 0.73). The overall SACIE-R scale had sufficient Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient (a = 0.74) (Taber, 2018).

4. Results

4.1 Mean (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) Factors of Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) and Sentiments, Attitudes, Concerns about Inclusive Education (SACIE-R)

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the factors of the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale. High mean scores were observed in the following factors of emotional intelligence of physical education teachers: "self-emotional appraisal", "others' emotional appraisal", "use of emotion" and moderate means on the factor "regulation of emotion".

Moreover, Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics on the Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education questionnaire. Moderate means were observed in "attitudes about inclusive education", moderate to low in the factor "concerns about inclusive education" and low means in the factor "sentiments about inclusive education".

Table 1: Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD) of Factors of the Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) and Sentiments, Attitudes, Concerns about Inclusion Education (SACIE-R)

	Range	M.	S.D
Factors of WLEIS			
Self-emotional appraisal	1-7	5.77	0.88
Others' emotional appraisal	1-7	5.71	0.84
Use of emotions	1-7	5.65	0.96
Regulation of emotions	1-7	5.13	1.13
Factors of SACIE-R			
Sentiments about inclusive education	1-4	2.05	0.56
Attitudes about inclusive education	1-4	2.55	0.71
Concerns about inclusive education	1-4	2.30	0.62

4.2 Spearman Correlation between Factors of Wong Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) and Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale (SACIE-R)

Table 2 presents the results of the correlation of WLEIS factors with the factors of SACIE-R. It emerged that (i) "negative sentiments about inclusive education" (ii) "Concerns about inclusive education" was negatively correlated with all the emotional intelligence factors, namely (a) self-emotional appraisal, (b) others' emotional appraisal, (c) use of emotions and (d) regulation of emotions. Finally, the "attitudes about inclusive education" were positively correlated with (a) self-emotional appraisal, (b) others emotional appraisal, (c) use of emotions and (d) regulation of emotions.

Table 2: Spearman correlation between factors of Emotional Intelligence Scale and Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale

Factors	Negative Sentiments about Inclusive Education	Attitudes about Inclusive Education	Concerns about Inclusive Education
Overall Emotional Intelligence	-,220*	0,069**	-,265**
Self-emotional appraisal	-,149*	0,071**	-,185**
Others' emotional appraisal	-,173*	0,014**	-,279**
Use of emotions	-,177*	0,036**	-,244**
Regulation of emotions	-,218**	0,085**	-,211**

**p<0.01, *p<0.05

4.3 Correlation of EI Factors with Demographic Characteristics and Professional-related Variables

The results of the comparison of emotional intelligence factors based on the gender variable, showed that women understand better than their male colleagues both their

personal feelings ($M_{female} = 5.87$ vs $M_{male} = 5.42$, $p = 0.007$) ($Z = -2.687$ $p = 0.007$) and the emotions of their students ($M_{female} = 5.88$ vs $M_{male} = 5.15$, $p < 0,001$) ($Z = -4.392$ $P < 0.001$).

Regarding age, statistically significant mean differences were observed in the factor "Self-emotional appraisal" ($H(3) = 16.550$, $p = 0.001$), where according to the post hoc Bonferonni test, older teachers understand their personal emotions more ($M_{51+ years} = 6.03$ $p = 0.001$) compared to those aged up to 30 years ($M_{<30 years} = 5.52$ $p = 0.1$), teachers aged 31-40 years ($M_{31-40 years} = 5.70$, $p = 0.026$) and those who are 41-50 years ($M_{41-50 years} = 5.87$, $p = 0.001$). Moreover, in the factor "Others emotional appraisal" ($H(3) = 9.498$, $p = 0.023$) and according to the post hoc Bonferonni test, those aged 51+ years better understand the emotions of their students ($M_{51+ years} = 5.87$, $p = 0.006$), compared to those who are less than 30 years old ($M_{<30 years} = 5.48$, $p = 0.039$), aged 31-40 years ($M_{31-41years} = 5.71$, $p = 0.039$), and those who are 41-50 years old ($M_{41-50 years} = 5.80$, $p = 0.011$).

Regarding educational level the results showed statistically significant differences for the factor "Use of emotion" ($H(2) = 6.895$, $p = 0.032$). According to the Kruskal Wallis test and the post hoc Bonferroni, PhD holders seem to manage emotion better ($M_{PhD} = 5.89$) compared to those with MSc ($M_{MSc} = 5.67$, $p = 0.048$) and those with undergraduate degrees ($M_{BSc} = 5.57$, $p = 0.009$).

Regarding teaching experience the results showed statistically significant differences for the factor "Self-emotion appraisal" ($H(3) = 8.183$, $p = 0.042$). According to Kruskal Wallis test and the post hoc Bonferroni, the average of PE teachers with more than 21 years of teaching experience ($M_{>21 years teaching experience} = 5.95$) was statistically higher than the average of those with 0-5 years of teaching experience ($M_{0-5 years teaching experience} = 5.75$, $p = 0.028$) and those with 6-10 years of teaching experience ($M_{6-10 years teaching experience} = 5.61$, $p = 0.006$).

Regarding specialized studies in special education, it appears that teachers who have completed specialized studies in special education had a higher score in the factors: "Other emotional appraisal" ($M_{without studies in Special Education} = 5.59$ vs $M_{with studies in Special Education} = 5.87$, $p = 0.015$), "Use of emotion" ($M_{without studies in Special Education} = 5.48$ vs $M_{with studies in Special Education} = 5.86$, $p = 0.002$) και "Regulation of emotions" ($M_{without studies in Special Education} = 4.95$ vs $M_{with studies in Special education} = 5.34$, $p = 0.008$) compared to their counterparts who did not complete specialized studies.

4.4 SACIE-R Factors with Demographic Characteristics and Professional-related Variables

The comparison of the SACIE -R factors based on the age variable, showed statistically significant differences in the "Concerns" factor ($H(3) = 7.819$, $p = 0.049$). Specifically, the average of PE teachers who were less than 30 years old was statistically higher than the average of those who were 31-40 years old and 41-50 years old ($M_{<30 years} = 2.50$ vs $M_{31-40 years} = 2.15$ vs $M_{41-50 years} = 2.29$ vs $M_{>51 years} = 2.32$). The findings suggested that younger teachers were more concerned about the success of the behavioural inclusive practices they adopted.

The results of the comparison of the SACIE-R factors based on specialized studies in Special Education showed that the mean of teachers who had conducted studies in

Special Education was statistically lower than the mean of those who had not conducted studies in the factors "Negative Sentiments" ($M_{with\ studies\ in\ Special\ Education} = 1.90$ vs $M_{without\ studies\ in\ Special\ Education} = 2.18$, $p < 0.001$) and "Concerns" ($M_{with\ studies\ in\ Special\ Education} = 2.17$ vs $M_{without\ studies\ in\ Special\ Education} = 2.41$). Furthermore, in the factor "Attitudes", the mean of participants with studies in special education ($M = 2.74$) was statistically higher ($p < 0.001$) than those without studies in special education ($M = 2.40$). The findings suggested that teachers with specialist studies in special education had fewer concerns about the outcomes of inclusion as they felt more confident, while maintaining more positive attitudes towards their general education colleagues.

4.5 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Social Justice Factors X Self-efficacy

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple linear regression with "Negative emotions about inclusive education" as the dependent variable. The results showed that (a) no multilinearity was present ($VIF \leq 2.888 < 3$), (b) the model was considered statistically significant with a low degree of fit ($F(6, 193) = 5.395$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 14.4\%$), and (c) "Training in Special Education" emerged as a predictor ($beta = -0.245$, $t = -3.251$, $p = 0.001$).

The predictive equation was: $Y = 2.758 - 0.299X$ (X: Training in Special Education).

Table 3: Multiple linear regression with "Negative emotions" as dependent variable

Independent variables	B	Beta	t	p-value	VIF
Constant	2.758		9.764	<0.001	
Self-emotions appraisal	0.007	0.010	0.092	0.927	2.888
Others' emotions appraisal	0.011	0.016	0.176	0.861	1.987
Use of emotions	-0,022	-0.038	-0.395	0.693	2.059
Regulation of emotions	-0.081	-0.165	-1.794	0.074	1.901
Training in Special Education	-0.299	-0.245	-3.251	0.001	1.277
Specific Studies in Special Education	-0.124	-0.110	-1.461	0.146	1.287

($F(6, 193) = 5.395$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 14.4\%$)

The results of the multiple linear regression with "Concerns" as the dependent variable (Table 4) showed that (a) no multilinearity was present ($VIF \leq 2.905 < 3$), (b) the model was considered statistically significant with a low degree of fit ($F(7, 192) = 5.859$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 17.6\%$), and (c) "Training in Special Education" ($beta = -0.249$, $t = -3.366$, $p = 0.001$) and "Age up to 30" ($beta = 0.150$, $t = 2.243$, $p = 0.026$) emerged as predictors.

The predictive equation is: $Y = 3.355 - 0.337X_1 + 0.218 X_2$ (Training in Special Education and Age up to 30 years old).

Table 4: Multiple linear regression with "Concerns" as dependent variable

Independent Variables	B	Beta	t	p-value	VIF
Constant	3,355		10,607	<0,001	
Self-emotions appraisal	0,082	0,117	1,049	0,295	2,905
Other emotions appraisal	-0,102	-0,138	-1,495	0,137	1,997
Use of emotions	-0,084	-0,130	-1,385	0,168	2,062
Regulation of emotions	-0,053	-0,097	-1,067	0,287	1,915

Training in Special Education	-0,337	-0,249	-3,366	0,001	1,277
Specific Studies in Special Education	-0,035	-0,029	-0,384	0,701	1,287
Age up to 30 years old	0,218	0,150	2,243	0,026	1,036

(F (7, 192) = 5.859, p<0.001, R²=17.6%)

5. Discussion

This study investigated the impact of physical education teachers' emotional intelligence on their attitude, perceptions and concerns about inclusive education. In addition, the study aimed to test the hypothesis of whether emotional intelligence predicts teachers' attitudes and sentiments regarding inclusion. Finally, it was tested whether the demographic and occupational profiles of teachers influence their emotional intelligence and attitude towards inclusive education. Emotional intelligence contributes to teachers mastering their emotional awareness, which leads them to redefine their approach to life, and teaching strategies according to the framework of the principles and philosophy of inclusive education.

The results showed that PE teachers exhibited an understanding of both their personal and their students' emotions. However, a reduced ability to regulate and control their emotions in situations of stress and anger was observed. In terms of sentiments, attitudes and concerns about inclusive education, the results revealed that PE teachers had positive sentiments about SEND pupils and were not concerned about the success of the inclusive strategies they adopted. However, despite positive sentiments on a theoretical level, the above findings do not translate into motivational inclusive behaviours and agreement that these pupils should attend formal classes. The results are in line with other studies (Yada, Leskinen, Savolainen & Schwab, 2022; Yada & Savolainen, 2017), which pointed out that appropriate and positive emotions are usually not enough to determine a consistent attitude towards the implementation of inclusive policies, especially when accompanied by concerns about their effectiveness.

Regarding the main research question, i.e., the correlation of emotional intelligence with (a) sentiments, (b) attitudes and (c) teachers' concerns about inclusion, the results partially confirmed the alternative hypothesis. Teachers' emotional intelligence was positively correlated with positive sentiments about SEND pupils, while it was negatively correlated with teachers' concerns about the inclusion process. However, the results of the study did not indicate a statistically significant correlation between emotional intelligence and teachers' general attitudes towards inclusion. This finding is in conflict with a recent study by Nwosu *et al.* (2023), who found a significant positive correlation between emotional intelligence and attitudes towards inclusion. The present teachers' emotional literacy may influence some aspects of teachers' beliefs, such as positive emotions and reduction of concerns, but it was unable to erase teachers' deep beliefs and attitudes about inclusion. Several studies have found moderate positive attitudes (Rekaa *et al.*, 2019) to negative attitudes (Block & Obrusnikova, 2009; Doukeridou *et al.*, 2011; Jerlinder, Danermark & Gill, 2010). A variety of factors that

influence and shape attitudes have been reported, such as the type and severity of disability (Hutzler & Barak, 2017; Obrusnikova, 2008; Wilhelmsen & Sorensen, 2017), class size and teacher-student ratio (Alves *et al.*, 2017), the level of knowledge and academic training of teachers (Hutzler & Barak, 2017; Ozer *et al.*, 2013; Qi *et al.*, 2017; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2015; Tindall *et al.*, 2016), teaching experience (Alves *et al.*, 2017; Ozer *et al.*, 2013), etc. Consequently, attitudes are able to facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Regarding the variables related to teachers' demographic and occupational profile and emotional intelligence, the results of the present study showed that female teachers are more emotionally empowered compared to their male counterparts. Recent literature reflects ambiguous results as female teachers may exhibit high levels of empathy and social awareness (Adamakis & Roccliffe, 2024; Cabello *et al.*, 2016; Patel, 2017; Voulgaraki *et al.*, 2023), while in other studies, no statistically significant correlations were observed (Bar-On, 2010; Katsora *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, teachers with extensive teaching experience, increased academic qualifications and specialized studies and/or training in Special Education seem to have more developed emotional skills, a finding that is in line with other studies (Reina *et al.*, 2019; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2015). Teaching experience appears to be another characteristic that influences attitudes, with several studies finding a strong positive correlation between teaching experience and attitudes and support for SEND students (Forlin *et al.*, 2009; Hofman & Kilimo, 2014; Katsora *et al.*, 2023; Rastegar & Memarpour, 2009).

In addition, teachers with specific studies and/or qualifications in Special Education have more positive attitudes towards inclusion compared to their general education counterparts (Dignath *et al.*, 2022). General education teachers display more neutral attitudes and negative feelings about inclusion and are more concerned about its success. The importance of special education training programs in enhancing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion is also emphasized in the study by Pappas *et al.* (2018). Finally, a plethora of research supports the positive correlation between teachers' feelings, attitudes, and perceptions towards inclusion and increased teaching effectiveness (Ozokcu, 2018; Savolainen *et al.*, 2002; Urton *et al.*, 2014; Yada *et al.*, 2022).

6. Limitations, Implications for Practitioners and Suggestions for Further Research

The results of the present study should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. Although the survey sample was relatively satisfactory (N= 200), it was not normal distributed, as 77% were female teachers. It is suggested that future research should use a broader sample stratified according to important demographic characteristics (gender, age, teaching experience). In addition, data on both attitudes and perceived emotional intelligence were collected by self-report. It is suggested that a mixed methodological design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods with triangulation, is utilized, which could provide a deeper understanding of the factors that shape teachers' attitudes towards inclusion.

Despite the methodological limitations, the study highlighted that teachers' emotional empowerment is particularly important in promoting a supportive and inclusive school culture. There is a need for academic institutions to formulate a curriculum that enhances the emotional skills of prospective teachers. It would be productive for school administrators to develop targeted training programs that help teachers foster skills in emotionally understanding, comprehending, using and managing what they and their students are feeling in order to create more open and socially just school communities. Finally, it would be interesting to study the curricula of academic institutions in order to determine the extent to which emotional empowerment issues are promoted among new teachers. Similar programmes could also be applied to the students themselves in order to raise their awareness, emotional development and acceptance of diversity in the school community. At the same time, school physical education could serve as a means of inclusion through unified groups of children with and without disabilities.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed the power of teachers' emotional intelligence on attitudes and concerns towards inclusive education. Emotionally intelligent teachers have better perceptions of inclusive education and more positive adaptive behaviours towards the philosophy and principles of inclusive education. The positive correlation between emotional intelligence and sentiments and the negative correlation with inclusion concerns point to the need to promote teachers' socio-emotional competence.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Emmanouil Skordilis is a Professor in the Adapted Physical Activity field. He teaches relevant courses in the University (NKUA), such as Inclusive Education in Physical Education, Adapted Physical Activity etc, and has several respective publications and presentations in International Congresses.

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