



# CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING BY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS IN SLOVAKIA

**Katarína Vančíková, Ružena Čiliaková, Mária Hušlová Orságová**

Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

E-mail: katarina.vancikova@umb.sk, ruzena.ciliakova@umb.sk,  
maria.orsagova@umb.sk

## Abstract

*Understanding how pre-service teachers conceptualize inclusive schooling is critical for effective teacher education. The present study examined how 455 pre-service teachers from eight Slovak universities perceive and prioritize eight distinct conceptualizations of an inclusive school, analyzing influences of professional specialization, study mode, and experience with diversity. A quantitative survey, utilizing ratings on a 6-point Likert scale and forced choice ranking, revealed “every child is valued” as the most preferred concept, signaling a strong normative commitment to individual children’s worth. “Bottom-up inclusion,” emphasizing practical, team-based approaches, also ranked highly. While no significant differences were found across teacher specializations or personal experience with diversity, part-time students showed stronger preference for “bottom-up inclusion” compared to full-time students, who prioritized “every child is valued”. These findings suggest that professional experience may shape more practical conceptualizations of inclusion, underscoring the importance of structured reflection alongside practical experience in teacher education.*

**Keywords:** *inclusive education, pre-service teachers, conceptualizations of inclusive schooling, quantitative survey*

## Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of ensuring equal educational opportunities has become central to education policy worldwide. The belief that all children, regardless of their characteristics, have the right to be educated together in the school closest to their home is reflected in various international documents (European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2007; United Nations, 2006). Inclusive education has become a true global norm (Powell et al., 2015), a global agenda (Pijl et al., 1997), and a topic of political debate around the globe. Some authors even describe it as a cliché of modern educational systems (Emam & Mohamed, 2011). Today, inclusive education is widely accepted as a key criterion of educational quality (EADSNE, 2011; OECD, 2016, 2018).

However, Dyson (2004) has noted that while inclusive education may be framed as a global agenda, it should not be assumed that it has the same meaning in all contexts. Instead, inclusion must be seen as a set of discourses shaped by variation. The concept of inclusion is unstable, variable, and, as Booth (1995) described, slippery. These perspectives are rooted in the theory of the social construction of reality, particularly the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), who have argued that social reality is shaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. These contexts form conceptual frameworks that provide cognitive tools to interpret the world. As Fay (1999) metaphorically has suggested, people perceive and “read” reality through the cognitive lenses shaped by these frameworks.

Further insight is offered by the theory of social representations, developed by Moscovici (1961), which explains how people collectively generate shared meanings through socially embedded discourse. Social representations, defined as systems of values, ideas, and practices (Moscovici, 1973), serve as interpretive codes that bind members of social groups together and help them classify and make sense of their world (Herzlich, 1973; Höijer, 2011). In this sense, the concept of inclusion also becomes a subject of shared interpretation.

Theories of social construction and social representation support the claim that inclusion is not a single reality (Booth, 1995; Dyson, 1999, 2004; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Savolainen et al., 2012). Cross-national comparisons show that the meaning of inclusion is shaped by economic, political, cultural, and historical factors. Artiles and Dyson (2004) have highlighted the contrast between high-income countries with established mainstream and special education systems, and low-income countries where special education has never been fully institutionalized. Such differences are shaped not only by structural factors but also by broader political and ideological currents that inform educational values, institutional trust, and curriculum. The degree of political liberalism, expressed through its support of pluralism, human rights, and institutional autonomy, affects how education is governed, what is taught, and how schools engage with families.

Inclusion is also influenced by how reforms are implemented. Poorly communicated or inconsistent reforms can provoke resistance or reframe the concept itself (Dinham, 2000). Today, the media play a crucial role in the construction of social representations. As Hodkinson (2005, 2006) has observed, newly qualified teachers in England substantially changed their views on inclusion after one year of teaching, possibly influenced by the media debate surrounding controversial public statements such as 'Inclusion has gone too far'. His interpretation has been supported by wider scholarship on the role of the media in shaping social reality (Cohen et al., 2020; De Oliveira Teixeira, 2020; Kay, 2018).

All of the contextual and structural factors mentioned above undoubtedly influence the way the concept of inclusive education is understood. This is supported by the findings of a critical conceptual analysis conducted by Göransson and Nilholm (2014), who have demonstrated that the global discourse on inclusive education reflects four qualitatively distinct categories of definitions. Moreover, there is variation not only across countries, but also within them. Kruse and Dederling (2017), for example, found different interpretations of inclusion among teachers in special and mainstream schools, and also between those working at primary versus secondary levels. Other studies have revealed professional group-specific discourses, for instance, among preschool teachers (Arhiri, 2014; Rochovská et al., 2024), primary teachers (Olsson et al., 2019), and special educators (Moberg et al., 1997).

### *Research Problem*

The concept of inclusive education in Slovakia, as elsewhere, is shaped by ongoing collective negotiation within historical and sociopolitical contexts. As Miškolci (2016) noted, the Slovak system is still influenced by bureaucratic centralism and medicalized views of difference inherited from the Austro-Hungarian and Communist eras. This legacy is reflected in continued references to integration rather than inclusion, as well as in policies centered on diagnostic authority and categorical funding. These structural characteristics, along with neoliberal performance pressures, affect how inclusion is interpreted and enacted.

Studies using Q methodology (Sabo et al., 2018; Vančiková et al., 2021) have identified a wide spectrum of conceptualizations of inclusive schools, shaped by historical, institutional, and personal factors. What remains unclear, however, is how these conceptualizations are distributed across different groups within teacher education and which of them carry the greatest influence. Understanding this distribution is essential for designing more effective inclusion-oriented training and support strategies for pre-service teachers.

### *Research Focus*

Previous studies (Sabo et al., 2018; Vančíková et al., 2021) have helped identify how the concept of an inclusive school is perceived. However, less is known about the relative strength and distribution of these conceptualizations among specific actor groups. This study addresses this gap by offering an in-depth exploration of how pre-service teachers in Slovakia understand the idea of an inclusive school.

### *Research Aim and Research Questions*

This study aimed to explore how pre-service teachers conceptualize the notion of an inclusive school. The aim was to identify the dominant ideas shaping their understanding of the term and to determine which conceptualizations resonate the most strongly. Specifically, it examined the key attributes that respondents associate with a school labeled inclusive. It assumes that variables such as professional specialization, mode of study, and personal experience with diversity may influence these subjective viewpoints. The research addressed the following questions:

RQ1: How do pre-service teachers perceive and rank different conceptualizations of an inclusive school, and which do they most and least prefer?

RQ2: Is the perception of an inclusive school influenced by teacher specialization, i.e., whether students are preparing for pre-primary, primary, or secondary education?

RQ3: Are there differences in perceptions between full- and part-time students?

RQ4: Does personal experience with diversity – specifically with children with disabilities, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, or with giftedness – affect how pre-service teachers conceptualize inclusive education?

## **Research Methodology**

### *Background*

This study builds on a previous qualitative research phase that utilized Q methodology to identify eight different conceptualizations of inclusive schooling prevalent in Slovakia (Sabo et al., 2018; Vančíková et al., 2018; Vančíková et al., 2021). These initial concepts, reflecting diverse perspectives shaped by institutional, historical, and personal factors, formed the theoretical foundation for the current investigation.

To examine how strongly pre-service teachers endorse these conceptualizations and to determine their distribution across different groups, a quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed. This research, conducted between April 2022 and February 2024, aimed to capture a snapshot of current perceptions within the Slovak teacher education landscape. The scope of the study focused on pre-service teachers across various specializations and study modes in Slovak universities, providing a broad empirical base for understanding their conceptual frameworks regarding inclusive schooling. The research approach was primarily correlational and descriptive, seeking to identify dominant conceptualizations and explore their relationship with key demographic and experiential variables. The theoretical underpinnings for interpreting these conceptualizations draw upon theories of social construction and social representation, which posit that perceptions of complex concepts, such as inclusion, are shaped by collective negotiation within socio-historical contexts, as detailed in the introduction.

The data collection instrument, a questionnaire developed within the VEGA 1/0642/20 research project, incorporated both ratings on a 6-point Likert scale and a forced choice ranking task. This approach, leveraging insights from the prior Q-methodological work, allowed for a

systematic yet nuanced quantitative analysis of preferences, effectively bridging the qualitative generation of concepts with their quantitative validation.

### *Sample*

The research population for this study comprised all pre-service teachers (students enrolled in teacher education programs at universities) in Slovakia. According to data from the Centre of Scientific and Technical Information of the Slovak Republic, there were 2373 teacher training students (both full-time and part-time) enrolled in Slovak universities during the data collection period.

The sample was obtained through convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method chosen due to its practical feasibility, which is reflected in the uneven regional distribution of participants. The recruitment process involved two main steps to maximize reach:

1. Initially, official channels were utilized: Vice-Deans for Education at universities offering teacher training programs were directly contacted and asked to distribute the online questionnaire through their academic information systems to their students.

2. Due to an initially low response rate, a second step was implemented: The survey link was further distributed via student platforms on social media, with the aim of reaching a broader segment of the target population.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout data collection. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was guaranteed by the absence of personal identifiers, and respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

The final sample consisted of 455 correctly completed questionnaires, representing a diverse group of bachelor and master's level students from eight Slovak universities. The average age of the respondents was 23 years. The sample composition was 88.6% full-time students and 11.4% part-time students. Regarding experience with diverse groups, most students reported no or only minimal experience with children with disabilities. This number was even slightly higher for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, with 80.8% of the respondents reporting little or no contact. The least contact was reported with respect to gifted children, with a total of 83% of respondents selecting one of the following responses: no experience, I perceive them only from a distance, or I have/had occasional contact in my immediate environment. Within the sample, 8 respondents reported having a disability, 3 students identified as being part of a socially disadvantaged group, and 12 identified as belonging to the group of gifted individuals.

### *Instrument and Procedures*

To address the research questions, a quantitative survey design was employed. Data were collected using an online questionnaire designed and constructed by the authors specifically for the purposes of this study, rather than adopting a standardized instrument. In the introductory section, the respondents were informed of the aim of the research and invited to freely express their unique understanding of the topic under investigation, while anonymity was ensured.

The core of the questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part included contextual items used to gather background information about the participants, namely: 1) age, 2) region, 3) profile of the study program (pre-primary teacher, primary education teacher, secondary education teacher), 4) current year of study, 5) mode of study (full-time/part-time), 6) experience with children with disabilities, 7) experience with children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and 8) experience with gifted children.

In the second part, respondents were presented with eight different concepts of an inclusive school, to which they were asked to respond. These concepts were derived from a previous phase of the research, in which a team of researchers used Q methodology to explore how educational actors understand the concept of an “inclusive school,” what attributes they associate with it, and which characteristics dominate their perceptions (Vančíková et al., 2021). The questionnaire contained shortened versions of the conceptual descriptions, as presented in Table 1. Respondents were asked to evaluate each concept in two ways: 1) using a rating on a 6-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 6 indicated strong agreement; 2) through a forced choice item, in which they were instructed to rank the eight inclusive school descriptions from the most preferred to the least preferred.

**Table 1**  
*Eight Concepts of an Inclusive School*

---

**An inclusive school is a school that...**

---

*Concept 1: ...develops inclusion from the bottom up – BOTTOM-UP INCLUSION*  
It is supported by experienced, motivated, and qualified professionals, such as teaching assistants, school psychologists, and special education teachers, on whom teachers can rely. Through effective collaboration among them, every child receives the support they need, and inclusion becomes a lived and sustainable reality, rather than something imposed from above.

---

*Concept 2: ...values every child – EVERY CHILD IS VALUED*  
It is a high-quality school with adequate materials and human resources, where all children, without exception, are welcomed with care and respect. In such an environment, they are free to develop, express their needs, explore their potential, and take responsibility for their own learning.

---

*Concept 3: ...promotes the integration of all children – INTEGRATION AS SOCIAL MISSION*  
It views integration as a social mission and actively seeks ways to improve its conditions in order to integrate the largest possible number of children who deviate from mainstream norms, as well as those from minority backgrounds.

---

*Concept 4: ...is responsive to the realities of the modern world – REFLECTING MODERN WORLD*  
It perceives multiculturalism as a natural feature of contemporary society and presents students with a realistic view of life within it. It teaches tolerance and acceptance, as well as critical thinking. The school creates space for students to explore their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as the unique characteristics of others. Promotes both autonomy and responsibility.

---

*Concept 5: ...responds flexibly to current educational trends – FLEXIBLE TO TRENDS*  
It is sensitive to developments in education and open to innovation. It actively responds to the growing demand to reduce educational inequalities and to realize the vision of social inclusion. The school participates in grant schemes and uses the available resources to enhance the individualization of education.

---

*Concept 6: ...is led by a strong, inclusion-minded leader – STRONG, INCLUSION-MINDED LEADERSHIP*  
It is led by a leader who is capable of initiating, supporting, and motivating staff while fostering a dialogue about the direction of the school. Such a leader inspires others to embrace the idea of inclusive education and ensures that the necessary conditions for its implementation are in place.

---

*Concept 7: ...recognizes the limits of integration – ACKNOWLEDGES LIMITS OF INTEGRATION*  
It is open to integrating disadvantaged groups of students into mainstream education and strives to include them within its capacities. However, it acknowledges that for some children, mainstream settings may not be the most appropriate option, considering both their specific needs and the needs of their non-disabled peers.

---

*Concept 8: ...welcomes all children of the local community – PROMOTING LOCAL INCLUSION*  
It regards the right to education as a fundamental principle and does not select its students. Instead, it opens its doors to all children in the surrounding area, regardless of the diversity of their educational needs. It operates as a community school, maintaining close cooperation with parents, whom it sees as equal partners in the educational process.

---

*Note.* Concepts adapted from Vančíková et al. (2021).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data collection instrument and the integrity of the data collected, a robust process was followed. The quality of questionnaire items was initially assessed in a pilot phase with ten pre-service teachers. Their feedback on clarity, comprehensibility, and ambiguity was crucial to refine the wording of the item and confirming content and face validity.

Furthermore, to ensure the accuracy of the data from the defined target group, the questionnaire was distributed by academic officials through the university's internal systems. This targeted distribution minimized invalid responses from outside the research population, significantly contributing to the study's internal validity.

### *Data Analysis*

Considering the ordinal nature of the data – comprising 1) ratings on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strong disagreement, 6 = strong agreement) and 2) rankings of eight school descriptions from most to least preferred – nonparametric statistical methods appropriate for ordinal data were employed to evaluate differences in variable distributions between groups. When comparing two groups, the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test was applied. For comparisons involving more than two groups, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used, which extends the Mann-Whitney  $U$  test to multiple independent groups and evaluates whether the distributions of values differ among them. In cases where the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ), post-hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn's test with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. While these tests do not explicitly compare medians or means, descriptive statistics, including medians with interquartile ranges ( $Mdn$ ,  $IQR$ ) and means with standard deviations ( $M$ ,  $SD$ ), were calculated for each group to provide additional context for interpreting the results. All analyses were conducted in R (version 4.1.1; R Core Team 2021).

## **Research Results**

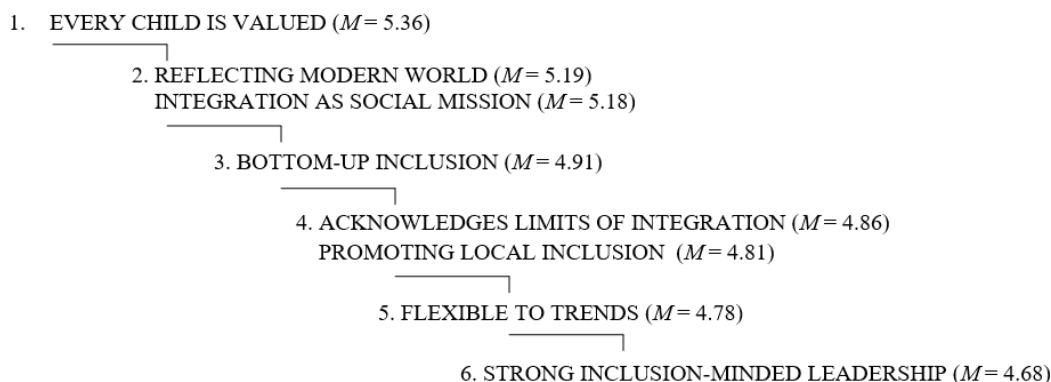
### *Overall Preferences in Inclusive School Concepts (RQ1)*

To address the first research question, participants' evaluations of the eight concepts of an inclusive school were obtained using a 6-point Likert scale and forced choice rankings (see Methods). This analysis aimed to determine which conceptualizations were perceived as most and least reflective of individual perspectives on inclusion.

As an initial step, Likert scale responses were examined to provide an overview of the perceived relevance of each concept. As shown in Figure 1, the concepts were grouped into six hierarchical categories based on descriptive and inferential statistics. The top category includes *every child is valued* ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), which was significantly more preferred than all other concepts. The second category combines *reflecting modern world* ( $M = 5.19$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and *integration as social mission* ( $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ), which did not differ significantly from each other. The third category contains *bottom-up inclusion* ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ), followed by a fourth category, which groups together *acknowledges limits of integration* ( $M = 4.86$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and *promoting local inclusion* ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). Although these two concepts did not differ significantly from *flexible to trends* ( $M = 4.78$ ), the latter was significantly lower than *bottom-up inclusion* and therefore forms a fifth category on its own. Finally, *strong inclusion-minded leadership* ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) was assigned to a sixth and lowest category, being statistically distinct from the preceding group and receiving the lowest overall endorsement.

**Figure 1**

*Ranking of Preferences among Inclusive School Concepts - Scale Ratings*



Complementary findings were observed on the forced choice item, where participants were asked to rank the eight concepts from most to least preferred. Once again, *every child is valued* was ranked first, confirming its strong position across both measures. *Bottom-up inclusion* and *integration as social mission* consistently followed in second and third place, respectively. *Acknowledges limits of integration* and *promoting local inclusion* ranked lowest overall (Table 2). This ranking reinforces the earlier findings from the Likert scale rating: pre-service teachers are more drawn to inclusive school models that emphasize universal acceptance, student worth, and collaboration, while placing less emphasis on institutional constraints, adaptability to policy trends, or leadership structures.

**Table 2**

*Ranking of Preferences among Inclusive School Concepts - Forced Choice Item*

| Concepts                            | Scale ratings |      |      |      | Forced choice item |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|------|------|------|--------------------|------|------|------|
|                                     | M             | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  | M                  | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  |
| Bottom-up inclusion                 | 4.91          | 1.17 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 6.10               | 1.93 | 7.00 | 3.00 |
| Every child is valued               | 5.36          | 1.04 | 6.00 | 1.00 | 7.10               | 1.28 | 7.00 | 1.00 |
| Integration as social mission       | 5.18          | 1.11 | 6.00 | 1.00 | 5.67               | 1.63 | 6.00 | 2.00 |
| Reflecting modern world             | 5.19          | 1.09 | 6.00 | 1.00 | 4.44               | 1.64 | 5.00 | 2.50 |
| Flexible to trends                  | 4.78          | 1.19 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 3.25               | 1.52 | 3.00 | 2.00 |
| Strong, inclusion-minded leadership | 4.68          | 1.28 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 3.26               | 1.86 | 3.00 | 2.00 |
| Acknowledges limits of integration  | 4.86          | 1.29 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 3.17               | 1.97 | 2.00 | 3.00 |
| Promoting local inclusion           | 4.81          | 1.30 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 3.10               | 2.10 | 3.00 | 4.00 |

*Differences in Perceptions by Specialization Track (RQ2)*

Analysis of Likert scale ratings across pre-service pre-primary, primary, and secondary teachers showed a high degree of consistency. In all three groups, the most highly rated concept was *every child is valued* ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Other concepts receiving average scores above 5 included *integration as social mission* and *reflecting modern world*. Among pre-service pre-primary teachers, *promoting local inclusion* also exceeded the 5-point threshold, while the

same concept received lower scores from the other two groups. The concept rated lowest in all three groups was *strong, inclusion minded leadership* ( $M = 4.62, SD = 1.34$ ). The full results are presented in Table 3.

Forced choice rankings showed the same consistent pattern: all three groups of pre-service teachers placed *every child is valued* in first place: primary ( $M = 7.15, SD = 1.22$ ), secondary ( $M = 7.03, SD = 1.27$ ), and pre-primary ( $M = 6.99, SD = 1.35$ ). Followed by *bottom-up inclusion*: pre-primary ( $M = 6.25, SD = 1.81$ ), primary ( $M = 5.98, SD = 2.00$ ), secondary ( $M = 5.97, SD = 1.99$ ) and *integration as social mission*: pre-primary ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.72$ ), primary ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.59$ ), secondary ( $M = 5.66, SD = 1.58$ ). Although some differences appeared in concepts with lower rank, inferential analysis did not confirm statistically significant differences. These findings (Table 3) suggest a broad conceptual alignment between teacher education specializations.

**Table 3**  
*Perception Differences by Teacher Specialization Track - Scale Ratings and Forced Choice Item*

| Concepts                            | Pre-service teacher specialization | Scale ratings |      |      |      |      | Forced choice item |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|------|------|------|------|--------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                     |                                    | M             | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  | p    | M                  | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  | p    |
| Bottom-up inclusion                 | Pre-primary                        | 4.94          | 1.15 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .509 | 6.25               | 1.81 | 7.00 | 3.00 | .397 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 4.98          | 1.06 | 5.00 | 1.75 |      | 5.98               | 2.00 | 6.00 | 3.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 4.79          | 1.27 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 5.97               | 1.99 | 7.00 | 3.00 |      |
| Every child is valued               | Pre-primary                        | 5.38          | 0.93 | 6.00 | 1.00 | .902 | 6.99               | 1.35 | 7.00 | 1.00 | .384 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 5.40          | 0.97 | 6.00 | 1.00 |      | 7.15               | 1.22 | 8.00 | 1.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 5.31          | 1.21 | 6.00 | 1.00 |      | 7.03               | 1.27 | 7.00 | 1.50 |      |
| Integration as social mission       | Pre-primary                        | 5.14          | 1.12 | 5.00 | 1.00 | .174 | 5.67               | 1.72 | 6.00 | 2.00 | .919 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 5.30          | 1.03 | 6.00 | 1.00 |      | 5.67               | 1.59 | 6.00 | 2.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 5.10          | 1.15 | 5.00 | 1.00 |      | 5.66               | 1.58 | 6.00 | 2.00 |      |
| Reflecting modern world             | Pre-primary                        | 5.30          | 0.90 | 6.00 | 1.00 | .747 | 4.50               | 1.65 | 5.00 | 3.00 | .717 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 5.20          | 1.03 | 6.00 | 1.00 |      | 4.34               | 1.61 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 5.06          | 1.32 | 6.00 | 2.00 |      | 4.46               | 1.67 | 5.00 | 2.50 |      |
| Flexible to trends                  | Pre-primary                        | 4.90          | 1.12 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .348 | 3.24               | 1.47 | 3.00 | 2.00 | .083 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 4.78          | 1.11 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.03               | 1.37 | 3.00 | 2.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 4.66          | 1.33 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.48               | 1.69 | 4.00 | 2.50 |      |
| Strong, inclusion-minded leadership | Pre-primary                        | 4.73          | 1.27 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .707 | 3.25               | 1.78 | 3.00 | 2.00 | .879 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 4.66          | 1.22 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.23               | 1.96 | 3.00 | 2.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 4.62          | 1.34 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.29               | 1.86 | 3.00 | 2.00 |      |
| Acknowledges limits of integration  | Pre-primary                        | 4.81          | 1.21 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .350 | 3.04               | 1.87 | 2.00 | 2.00 | .808 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 4.91          | 1.35 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.21               | 1.99 | 3.00 | 3.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 4.86          | 1.33 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.26               | 2.08 | 3.00 | 3.50 |      |
| Promoting local inclusion           | Pre-primary                        | 5.03          | 1.06 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .076 | 3.05               | 2.12 | 2.50 | 4.00 | .111 |
|                                     | Primary                            | 4.72          | 1.45 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.37               | 2.13 | 3.00 | 4.00 |      |
|                                     | Secondary                          | 4.64          | 1.36 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 2.89               | 2.02 | 2.00 | 2.00 |      |

*Differences in Perceptions by Study Mode (RQ3)*

Differences between full- and part-time students were examined using both Likert scale scores and forced choice rankings. A statistically significant difference was found only in Concept 1 – *bottom-up inclusion*, which was rated higher by part-time students ( $M = 5.19, SD = 1.14$ ) than by full-time students ( $M = 4.87, SD = 1.65; p = .022$ ).

In forced choice classification, this concept was again preferred more strongly by part-time students ( $M = 6.46, SD = 1.96$ ) than by full-time students ( $M = 6.02, SD = 1.93; p = .038$ ). In contrast, Concept 2 – *every child is valued* was more highly ranked by full-time students ( $M = 7.09, SD = 1.27$ ) than by part-time students ( $M = 6.81, SD = 1.36; p = .047$ ). No other statistically significant differences were found between the two groups. These findings suggest a slight tendency for full-time students to favor idealistic, child-centered models of inclusion, while part-time students may be more inclined toward practical, bottom-up approaches. The full results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
*Perception Differences by Study Mode - Scale Ratings and Forced Choice Item*

| Concepts                            | Study mode | Scale ratings |      |      |      |      | Forced choice item |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------------|------------|---------------|------|------|------|------|--------------------|------|------|------|------|
|                                     |            | M             | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  | p    | M                  | SD   | Mdn  | IQR  | p    |
| Bottom-up inclusion                 | Full-time  | 4.87          | 1.65 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .022 | 6.02               | 1.93 | 7.00 | 3.00 | .038 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 5.19          | 1.14 | 5.00 | 1.00 |      | 6.46               | 1.96 | 7.00 | 3.00 |      |
| Every child is valued               | Full-time  | 5.36          | 1.04 | 6.00 | 1.00 | .998 | 7.09               | 1.27 | 8.00 | 1.00 | .047 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 5.38          | 1.01 | 6.00 | 1.00 |      | 6.81               | 1.36 | 7.00 | 2.00 |      |
| Integration as social mission       | Full-time  | 5.21          | 1.08 | 6.00 | 1.00 | .159 | 5.72               | 1.61 | 6.00 | 2.00 | .091 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 4.96          | 1.30 | 5.00 | 1.25 |      | 5.27               | 1.77 | 6.00 | 3.00 |      |
| Reflecting modern world             | Full-time  | 5.18          | 1.11 | 6.00 | 1.00 | .721 | 4.46               | 1.64 | 5.00 | 3.00 | .496 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 5.29          | 0.98 | 5.50 | 1.00 |      | 4.29               | 1.65 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      |
| Flexible to trends                  | Full-time  | 4.78          | 1.19 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .954 | 3.25               | 1.53 | 3.00 | 2.00 | .991 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 4.81          | 1.16 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.21               | 1.45 | 3.00 | 2.00 |      |
| Strong, inclusion-minded leadership | Full-time  | 4.66          | 1.27 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .285 | 3.23               | 1.83 | 3.00 | 2.00 | .442 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 4.83          | 1.29 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.50               | 2.07 | 3.00 | 2.25 |      |
| Acknowledges limits of integration  | Full-time  | 4.85          | 1.28 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .389 | 3.13               | 1.94 | 2.00 | 2.00 | .451 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 4.94          | 1.38 | 5.50 | 2.00 |      | 3.46               | 2.23 | 2.50 | 3.00 |      |
| Promoting local inclusion           | Full-time  | 4.81          | 1.28 | 5.00 | 2.00 | .982 | 3.11               | 2.12 | 3.00 | 4.00 | .821 |
|                                     | Part-time  | 4.77          | 1.41 | 5.00 | 2.00 |      | 3.00               | 1.96 | 3.00 | 4.00 |      |

*Differences in Perceptions Based on Experience with Diversity (RQ4)*

In the Likert scale ratings, most differences between groups were not statistically significant. The only exception was a marginally significant difference ( $p = .043$ ) for Concept 4 – *reflecting modern world* in relation to experience with socially disadvantaged children. Here, respondents with no such experience rated this concept slightly higher than those with more frequent experience. However, the pattern was not robust across other concepts or domains (Table 5).

**Table 5**  
*Perception Differences by Experience with Diversity Scale Ratings*

| Concepts                            | Experience | Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds |             |      |  |             |      |                 |             |      |
|-------------------------------------|------------|--|-------------|------|--|-------------|------|-----------------|-------------|------|
|                                     |            | Children with disabilities                       |             |      | Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds |             |      | Gifted children |             |      |
|                                     |            | M (SD)   | Mdn (IQR)   | p    | M (SD)   | Mdn (IQR)   | p    | M (SD)          | Mdn (IQR)   | p    |
| Bottom-up inclusion                 | None       | 4.80 (1.23)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .462 | 4.99 (1.08)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .705 | 4.82 (1.20)     | 5.00 (2.00) | .160 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.96 (1.14)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.86 (1.20)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.96 (1.11)     | 5.00 (1.50) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.91 (1.13)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.89 (1.22)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 5.05 (1.16)     | 5.00 (1.00) |      |
| Every child is valued               | None       | 5.38 (0.97)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) | .859 | 5.50 (0.82)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) | .406 | 5.33 (1.06)     | 6.00 (1.00) | .672 |
|                                     | Occasional | 5.35 (1.09)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.32 (1.07)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.39 (0.95)     | 6.00 (1.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 5.37 (1.00)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.26 (1.23)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.40 (1.13)     | 6.00 (1.00) |      |
| Integration as social mission       | None       | 5.06 (1.20)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .441 | 5.19 (1.09)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) | .937 | 5.17 (1.15)     | 6.00 (1.00) | .400 |
|                                     | Occasional | 5.23 (1.06)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.19 (1.05)                                      | 5.00 (1.00) |      | 5.15 (1.02)     | 5.00 (1.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 5.23 (1.09)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.14 (1.27)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.27 (1.15)     | 6.00 (1.00) |      |
| Reflecting modern world             | None       | 5.24 (1.06)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) | .642 | 5.41 (0.84)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) | .043 | 5.22 (1.09)     | 6.00 (1.00) | .787 |
|                                     | Occasional | 5.19 (1.14)                                      | 6.00 (1.00) |      | 5.15 (1.11)                                      | 5.00 (1.00) |      | 5.19 (1.05)     | 5.00 (1.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 5.15 (1.03)                                      | 5.00 (1.00) |      | 4.94 (1.33)                                      | 5.50 (2.00) |      | 5.12 (1.19)     | 6.00 (1.00) |      |
| Flexible to trends                  | None       | 4.74 (1.16)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .504 | 4.91 (1.10)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .335 | 4.90 (1.19)     | 5.00 (2.00) | .056 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.83 (1.22)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.77 (1.19)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.70 (1.16)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.73 (1.17)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.62 (1.32)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.61 (1.23)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
| Strong, inclusion-minded leadership | None       | 4.73 (1.28)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .761 | 4.68 (1.24)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .763 | 4.64 (1.30)     | 5.00 (2.00) | .598 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.63 (1.32)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.71 (1.25)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.78 (1.17)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.69 (1.15)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.56 (1.39)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.56 (1.40)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
| Acknowledges limits of integration  | None       | 4.87 (1.22)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .843 | 4.87 (1.26)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | 1.00 | 4.92 (1.27)     | 5.00 (2.00) | .199 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.83 (1.33)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.85 (1.32)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.74 (1.28)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.91 (1.31)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.85 (1.29)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.90 (1.38)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
| Promoting local inclusion           | None       | 4.78 (1.36)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .841 | 4.95 (1.24)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) | .264 | 4.91 (1.26)     | 5.00 (2.00) | .136 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.81 (1.26)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.74 (1.34)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.66 (1.32)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.84 (1.33)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.75 (1.28)                                      | 5.00 (2.00) |      | 4.78 (1.34)     | 5.00 (2.00) |      |

*Note.* *None* = no experience; only distant awareness of such children; *Occasional* = occasional contact with such children in one's immediate environment (for example, family, school, or work); *Frequent* = more frequent or direct contact in one's immediate environment, or personal identification with the group (for example, the respondent belongs to it).

Similarly, in the forced choice rankings, no statistically significant differences were found between the experience groups for any of the eight concepts. Although some fluctuations in mean or median values were observed, particularly in Concepts 1 and 2, these did not reach the level of statistical significance (Table 6).

**Table 6**  
*Perception Differences by Experience with Diversity – Forced Choice Item*

| Concepts                            | Experience | Children with disabilities |                |      | Children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds |             |      | Gifted children |             |      |
|-------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------|----------------|------|--|-------------|------|-----------------|-------------|------|
|                                     |            | M (SD)                     | Mdn (IQR)      | p    | M (SD)   | Mdn (IQR)   | p    | M (SD)          | Mdn (IQR)   | p    |
| Bottom-up inclusion                 | None       | 6.18<br>(1.93)             | 7.00<br>(3.00) | .086 | 6.21<br>(1.92)                                   | 7.00 (3.00) | .244 | 6.01<br>(1.93)  | 6.00 (3.00) | .381 |
|                                     | Occasional | 6.17<br>(1.88)             | 7.00<br>(3.00) |      | 5.92<br>(2.00)                                   | 6.00 (3.00) |      | 6.04<br>(1.93)  | 7.00 (3.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 5.71<br>(2.03)             | 6.00<br>(2.00) |      | 6.28<br>(1.74)                                   | 7.00 (3.00) |      | 6.30<br>(1.95)  | 7.00 (2.00) |      |
| Every child is valued               | None       | 7.07<br>(1.14)             | 7.00<br>(1.00) | .063 | 6.96<br>(1.31)                                   | 7.00 (2.00) | .100 | 7.11<br>(1.30)  | 8.00 (1.00) | .277 |
|                                     | Occasional | 6.97<br>(1.35)             | 7.00<br>(2.00) |      | 7.17<br>(1.22)                                   | 8.00 (1.00) |      | 7.03<br>(1.34)  | 7.00 (1.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 7.26<br>(1.28)             | 8.00<br>(1.00) |      | 6.93<br>(1.38)                                   | 7.00 (1.50) |      | 6.97<br>(1.12)  | 7.00 (2.00) |      |
| Integration as social mission       | None       | 5.56<br>(1.74)             | 6.00<br>(3.00) | .725 | 5.62<br>(1.63)                                   | 6.00 (2.00) | .321 | 5.73<br>(1.58)  | 6.00 (2.00) | .459 |
|                                     | Occasional | 5.70<br>(1.57)             | 6.00<br>(2.00) |      | 5.75<br>(1.63)                                   | 6.00 (2.00) |      | 5.66<br>(1.70)  | 6.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 5.74<br>(1.65)             | 6.00<br>(2.00) |      | 5.53<br>(1.66)                                   | 6.00 (3.00) |      | 5.49<br>(1.67)  | 6.00 (3.00) |      |
| Reflecting modern world             | None       | 4.30<br>(1.67)             | 5.00<br>(2.00) | .492 | 4.35<br>(1.61)                                   | 5.00 (2.00) | .564 | 4.45<br>(1.62)  | 5.00 (2.75) | .953 |
|                                     | Occasional | 4.46<br>(1.66)             | 5.00<br>(2.00) |      | 4.52<br>(1.64)                                   | 5.00 (3.00) |      | 4.39<br>(1.76)  | 5.00 (3.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 4.56<br>(1.57)             | 5.00<br>(2.50) |      | 4.37<br>(1.72)                                   | 5.00 (3.00) |      | 4.48<br>(1.47)  | 5.00 (2.00) |      |
| Flexible to trends                  | None       | 3.31<br>(1.56)             | 3.00<br>(2.00) | .824 | 3.20<br>(1.47)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) | .935 | 3.18<br>(1.40)  | 3.00 (2.00) | .809 |
|                                     | Occasional | 3.21<br>(1.52)             | 3.00<br>(2.00) |      | 3.27<br>(1.53)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) |      | 3.34<br>(1.65)  | 3.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 3.25<br>(1.47)             | 3.00<br>(2.00) |      | 3.26<br>(1.60)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) |      | 3.25<br>(1.60)  | 3.00 (2.00) |      |
| Strong, inclusion-minded leadership | None       | 3.34<br>(1.88)             | 3.00<br>(2.00) | .656 | 3.35<br>(1.95)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) | .830 | 3.21<br>(1.89)  | 3.00 (2.00) | .552 |
|                                     | Occasional | 3.18<br>(1.82)             | 3.00<br>(2.00) |      | 3.18<br>(1.80)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) |      | 3.35<br>(1.80)  | 3.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 3.34<br>(1.93)             | 3.00<br>(2.50) |      | 3.30<br>(1.90)                                   | 3.00 (2.00) |      | 3.22<br>(1.93)  | 3.00 (2.00) |      |
| Acknowledges limits of integration  | None       | 3.18<br>(1.98)             | 2.00<br>(3.00) | .876 | 3.19<br>(2.00)                                   | 2.00 (3.00) | .682 | 3.21<br>(1.96)  | 3.00 (3.00) | .748 |
|                                     | Occasional | 3.20<br>(1.99)             | 3.00<br>(3.00) |      | 3.10<br>(1.95)                                   | 2.00 (2.00) |      | 3.05<br>(1.88)  | 2.00 (2.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 3.06<br>(1.95)             | 2.00<br>(2.00) |      | 3.31<br>(2.00)                                   | 3.00 (3.00) |      | 3.29<br>(2.21)  | 2.00 (3.00) |      |
| Promoting local inclusion           | None       | 3.06<br>(2.07)             | 2.00<br>(4.00) | .992 | 3.12<br>(2.17)                                   | 2.00 (4.00) | .859 | 3.10<br>(2.14)  | 2.50 (4.00) | .935 |
|                                     | Occasional | 3.12<br>(2.15)             | 3.00<br>(4.00) |      | 3.10<br>(2.03)                                   | 3.00 (4.00) |      | 3.15<br>(2.11)  | 3.00 (4.00) |      |
|                                     | Frequent   | 3.08<br>(2.00)             | 3.00<br>(3.50) |      | 3.02<br>(2.19)                                   | 2.00 (4.00) |      | 3.00<br>(1.97)  | 3.00 (3.00) |      |

Note. *None* = no experience; only distant awareness of such children; *Occasional* = occasional contact with such children in one's immediate environment (for example, family, school, or work); *Frequent* = more frequent or direct contact in one's immediate environment, or personal identification with the group (for example, the respondent belongs to it).

In general, the findings suggest that personal experience with diverse learners does not significantly shape how pre-service teachers conceptualize inclusive schooling. The preferences were largely consistent regardless of whether the students had previous contact with children with disabilities, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, or with giftedness.

## Discussion

The consistent prioritization of the concept that every child is valued by pre-service teachers in Slovakia aligned with global norms for inclusive education (Krischler et al., 2019; Savolainen et al., 2012) and emphasized respect for student diversity and equal rights (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013). This principle, embedded in international declarations, reflected a sociocultural understanding of learning and a focus on equitable education beyond disability (Lalvani, 2012; Lalvani, 2013). This finding is particularly salient given Slovakia's historically strong special education tradition and ongoing shift towards more inclusive approaches (Miškolci, 2016, 2024).

Bottom-up inclusion was strongly endorsed, highlighting the role of teaching assistants and special educators whose collaborative support ensures effective inclusion. This preference reflects the importance of professional networks in inclusive practice (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; Zagona et al., 2017) and the practical need for stronger in-school support in contexts with staffing inadequacies (Simanová et al., 2024).

The notably low ranking of Strong, inclusion-minded leadership suggested that pre-service teachers in Slovakia may associate effective inclusion more with informal, relational, and internal dynamics than with formal authority. This perspective reflects the historically centralized administration in Slovakia, where key decisions on special educational needs are often made externally (Miškolci, 2016), potentially diminishing the perceived value of internal leadership. Preference for bottom-up approaches appears to compensate for limited formal authority, emphasizing reliance on practical, collaborative support, in contrast with decentralized models in countries such as Finland (Miškolci, 2016).

Significant differences in concept preferences emerged between full- and part-time students. Full-time students most favored Every child is valued, whereas part-time students emphasized Bottom-up inclusion, likely reflecting the greater professional experience and practical engagement of in-service teachers (Rumalutur & Kurniawati, 2019). This suggests that while teacher education programs cultivate inclusive ideals, experience shapes the application of inclusion in practice (Ostrowdun, 2020).

No statistically significant differences were found in conceptualizations of inclusive schooling based on prior experience with diverse children. This indicates that exposure alone may be insufficient to foster nuanced understandings of inclusion. Structured reflection and guided learning appear necessary to develop critical perspectives and social justice approaches (Bentley-Williams & Morgan, 2013; Lalvani, 2012; Zagona et al., 2017). These findings underscore the importance of teacher education programs in integrating practical experiences with critical reflection to strengthen inclusive practice.

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, its cross-sectional design provides only a snapshot of pre-service teachers' conceptualizations, making it unable to capture the dynamic evolution of these perspectives over time or establish causal relationships. Second, the convenience sampling method employed, despite a two-step recruitment strategy, inherently limits the generalizability of findings to the broader Slovak pre-service teacher population, as evidenced by uneven regional representation. Third, reliance on self-reported data via an online questionnaire may introduce biases, such as social desirability, potentially influencing participants' responses regarding their conceptualizations and reported experiences with diversity. Finally, while the eight concepts of inclusive schooling

were rigorously derived from prior Q-methodology, their presentation in a fixed-choice format inherently constrains the exploration of other uncaptured conceptualizations of inclusion. Addressing these limitations in future research through longitudinal designs, more representative sampling, and complementary qualitative methods would further enrich the understanding of how educators conceptualize inclusive education.

## Conclusions and Implications

This study explored pre-service teachers' conceptualizations of inclusive schooling in Slovakia using a quantitative survey with 455 participants. Employing Likert-type scales and forced-choice rankings, the research investigated how pre-service teachers perceive and prioritize eight distinct conceptualizations. The findings consistently revealed that every child is valued as the most preferred concept, signaling a strong normative commitment to individual student worth and universal acceptance. Bottom-up inclusion, emphasizing collaborative, team-based approaches, also received significant endorsement. While full-time students prioritized the idealistic view of inclusion, part-time students showed stronger support for practical, bottom-up approaches. Notably, no statistically significant differences were found across teacher specializations or based on prior experience with diverse learners.

These findings have key implications for teacher education, emphasizing the need to bridge the gap between idealistic conceptualizations and practical implementation. Teacher preparation programs should integrate structured opportunities for critical reflection, peer dialogue, and practical application, particularly for full-time students. For part-time students, the focus should be on refining their existing practical insights with deeper theoretical frameworks. From a policy perspective, understanding these diverse conceptualizations is vital for shaping effective national strategies for inclusive education in Slovakia. Future research should investigate how these conceptualizations evolve with teaching experience and how they translate into actual pedagogical practices in diverse school settings through longitudinal studies.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Grant No. APVV-22-0450.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

## Data availability statement

The research data supporting this study are available from the first author, Katarína Vančíková, upon reasonable request.

## Ethics Statement

The Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica approved the research (approval number: 9302024). Respondents who answered the questionnaire were informed about their research intentions using an online form.

## References

- Alves, I. (2019). International inspiration and national aspirations: Inclusive education in Portugal. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(7-8), 862–875. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1624846>
- Arhiri, L. (2014). Kindergarten teachers' social representations of inclusive education in Romania. *Psihologia socială*, 33, 75–84. <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=91139>
- Artiles, A. J., & Dyson, A. (2005). Inclusive education in the globalization age: The promise of comparative cultural historical analysis. In D. Mitchell (Ed.), *Contextualizing inclusive education* (pp. 37–62). Routledge.
- Bentley-Williams, R., & Morgan, J. (2013). Reframing inclusive practice in teacher education: A reflexive approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(2), 118–134.
- Berger P., L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Penguin Group.
- Booth, T. (1995). Mapping inclusion and exclusion: Concepts for all? In C. Clark, A. Dyson, & A. Millward (Eds.), *Towards inclusive schools?* (pp. 96–108). David Fulton.
- Dyson, A. (1999). Inclusion and inclusions: Theories and discourses in inclusive education. In H. Daniels & P. Garner (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 1999: Inclusive Education* (pp. 36–53). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203080245>
- Dyson, A. (2004). Inclusive education: A global agenda? *The Japanese Journal of Special Education*, 41(6), 613–625. <https://doi.org/10.6033/tokkyou.41.613>
- European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE]. (2011). *Mapping the implementation of policy for inclusive education*. European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.
- European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. (2023). *EASIE 2021–2022 cross-country report: Information on inclusive education systems*. <https://www.european-agency.org/resources/publications/EASIE-2021-2022-cross-country-report>
- European Commission. (2014). *Report on the Implementation of the UN CRPD by the EU*. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1138&langId=en&eventsId=1055&moreDocuments=yes&tableName=eventsDocuments>
- Emam, M. M., & Mohamed, A. H. H. (2011). Preschool and primary school teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in Egypt: The role of experience and self-efficacy. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 29, 976–985. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.331>
- Fay, B. (1999). *Contemporary philosophy of social science: A multicultural approach*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Göransson, K., & Nilholm, C. (2014). Conceptual diversities and empirical shortcomings—a critical analysis of research on inclusive education. *European journal of special needs education*, 29(3), 265–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933545>
- Herzlich, C. (1973). *Health and illness: A social psychological analysis*. Academic Press.
- Hodkinson, A. (2005). Conceptions and misconceptions of inclusive education: A Critical examination of final-year teacher trainees' knowledge and understanding of inclusion. *Research in Education*, 73(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.7227/RIE.73.2>
- Hodkinson, A. (2006). Conceptions and misconceptions of inclusive education - one year on: A critical analysis of newly qualified teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusion. *Research in Education*, 76(1), 43–55. <https://doi.org/10.7227/RIE.76.4>
- Hodkinson, A. (2011). Inclusive education and the cultural representation of disability and disabled people: “Let them eat cake”. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 28(2), 10–21.
- Höijer, B. (2011). Social representations theory: A new theory for media research. *Nordicom Review*, 32(2), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1515/nor-2017-0109>
- Chiner, E., Cardona-Moltó, M. C., & Gómez Puerta, J. M. (2015). Teachers' beliefs about diversity: An analysis from a personal and professional perspective. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 4(1), 18–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7821/naer.2015.1.113>
- Kay, N. (2018). *Les représentations sociales du changement climatique au Cameroun: Analyse de presses et analyse comparée chez les agriculteurs en zone équatoriale et en zone soudano-sahélienne* [Doctoral dissertation, Université d'Angers]. <https://hal.science/tel-02181570/>

- Kruse, S., & Dederling, K. (2017). The idea of inclusion: Conceptual and empirical diversities in Germany. *Improving Schools*, 21(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480217707835>
- Kusá, Z., & Juščáková, Z. (2017). Ready for inclusive education? Ethnographic and survey perspectives. *Sociológia*, 49(3), 309–337.
- Lalvani, P. (2013). Privilege, compromise, or social justice: Teachers' conceptualizations of inclusive education. *Disability & Society*, 28(1), 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.692028>
- Krischler, M., Powell J. J. W., & Pit-Ten Cate, I. M. (2019). What is meant by inclusion? On the effects of different definitions on attitudes toward inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 34(5), 632–648. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1580837>
- Miškolci, J. (2016). Inclusive education in the Slovak Republic two decades after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(2), 199–213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1079272>
- Miškolci, J. (2024). Inkluzívne vzdelávanie ako výzva ku komplexnej spoločenskej a politickej zmene. *Sociológia*, 56(5), 481–508. <https://doi.org/10.31577/sociologia.2024.56.5.18>
- Moberg, S., Zumberg, M., & Reinmaa, A. (1997). Inclusive education as perceived by prospective special education teachers in Estonia, Finland, and the United States. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 22(1), 49–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/154079699702200105>
- Moscovici, S. (1961). *La psychanalyse, son image et son public* [Psychoanalysis, its image, and its audience]. PUF.
- Moscovici, S. (1973). Foreword. In C. Herzlich (Ed.), *Health and illness: A social psychological analysis* (pp. 9–14). Academic Press.
- Triviño-Amigo, N., Mendoza-Muñoz, D. M., Mayordomo-Pinilla, N., Barrios-Fernández, S., Contreras-Barraza, N., Gil-Marín, M., Castillo, D., Galán-Arroyo, C., & Rojo-Ramos, J. (2022). Inclusive education in primary and secondary school: Perception of teacher training. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(23), Article 15451. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192315451>
- OECD. (2007). *Students with disabilities, learning difficulties and disadvantages: Policies, statistics and indicators*. OECD Publishing. [https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2008/02/students-with-disabilities-learning-difficulties-and-disadvantages\\_g1gh7e45/9789264027619-en.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2008/02/students-with-disabilities-learning-difficulties-and-disadvantages_g1gh7e45/9789264027619-en.pdf)
- United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol*. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>
- OECD. (2016). *Education at a glance 2016: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2016-en>
- OECD. (2018). *Equity in education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility, PISA*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>
- Olsson, I., Sand, M. L., & Stenberg, G. (2019). Teachers' perception of inclusion in elementary school: the importance of imitation. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 35(4), 567–575. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1709704>
- Ostrowdun, C. (2020). Representations of inclusion: How pre-service teachers understand and apply inclusion across situations. *Exceptionality Education International*, 30(3), 102–123. <http://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v30i3.13509>
- Pijl, S. J., Meijer, C. J., & Hegarty, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Inclusive education: A global agenda*. Psychology Press.
- Powell, J. J., Edelstein, B., & Blanck, J. M. (2015). Awareness-raising, legitimation, or backlash? Effects of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities on education systems in Germany. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 14(2), 227–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2014.982076>
- Rochovská, I., Klein, V., & Šílonová, V. (2024). The roles and responsibilities of the school support team in inclusive education in kindergartens. *Problems of Education in 21st Century*, 82(4), 521–538. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/24.82.521>
- Rumalutur, N., & Kurniawati, F. (2019). The attitudes of in-service and pre-service teachers toward inclusive education. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 229, 619–630. <https://doi.org/10.2991/iciap-18.2019.53>

- Sabo, R., Vančíková, K., Šukolová, D. & Vaníková, T. (2018). Social representations of inclusive school from the point of view of Slovak education actors. *The New Educational Review* 54(4), 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.15804/tner.2018.54.4.20>
- Savolainen, H., Engelbrecht, P., Nel, M., & Malinen, O. P. (2012). Understanding teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in inclusive education: Implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education. *European journal of special needs education*, 27(1), 51–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2011.613603>
- Simanová, L., Lynch, Z., & Švidraň Basarabová, B. (2024). The importance of foreign language learning and the teaching environment in primary education. In *ICERI2024 Proceedings* (pp. 6693–6700). <https://doi.org/10.21125/iceri.2024.1619>
- Skidmore, D. (2006). A theoretical model of pedagogical discourse. In D. Mitchell (Ed.), *Special educational needs and inclusive education: Major themes in education* (Vol. 3, pp. 56–57). Routledge.
- Vančíková, K., Basarabová, B., Sabo, R., & Šukolová, D. (2021). Various perceptions of inclusive school: Q methodological study. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 11(5), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2021-0100>
- Zagona, A. L., Kurth, J. A., & MacFarland, S. Z. C. (2017). Teachers' views of their preparation for inclusive education and collaboration. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 40(3), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417692969>

Received: July 02, 2025    Revised: August 21, 2025    Accepted: September 30, 2025

Cite as: Vančíková, K., Čiliaková, R., & Hušlová Orságová, M. (2025). Conceptualizations of inclusive schooling by pre-service teachers in Slovakia. *Problems of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 83(5), 689–704. <https://doi.org/10.33225/pec/25.83.689>

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Katarína Vančíková</b>                         | Prof, Professor, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:katarina.vancikova@umb.sk">katarina.vancikova@umb.sk</a><br>ORCID: <a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8423-7838">https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8423-7838</a>      |
| <b>Ružena Čiliaková</b><br>(Corresponding author) | PhD, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:ruzena.ciliakova@umb.sk">ruzena.ciliakova@umb.sk</a><br>ORCID: <a href="https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5176-6768">https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5176-6768</a> |
| <b>Mária Hušlová Orságová</b>                     | Mgr, Doctoral student, Faculty of Education, Matej Bel University, Ružová 13, 974 11 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia.<br>E-mail: <a href="mailto:maria.orsagova@umb.sk">maria.orsagova@umb.sk</a><br>ORCID: <a href="https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5869-7450">https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5869-7450</a>        |