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Towards inclusive education: Experiences from implementing the InterACT program in Poland

W stronę edukacji wolnej od uprzedzeń –
doświadczenia z wdrażania programu InterACT w Polsce

Abstract: The InterACT (Attitude Change and Tolerance) program is a preventive anti-discrimination educational program that promotes acceptance of stuttering and diversity among preschool and early school-age children. Although the program's effectiveness in shaping appropriate attitudes has been previously confirmed, there has been a lack of research focusing on the experiences of those implementing it. This study aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of individuals who implemented InterACT in Poland with particular emphasis on perceived benefits and challenges. Participants included speech and language therapists, students, teachers, and psychologists, each of whom facilitated the implementation of the program at least one time. A mixed-methods approach was used, including a survey ($n = 51$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 7$). The quantitative results confirmed high evaluations of the program's usefulness, ease of implementation and positive impact on children's attitudes toward stuttering and diversity. Qualitative analysis revealed the potential for modifying the program according to the group's needs, as well as the crucial role of the facilitator in its effectiveness. Respondents also highlighted the need for additional training on managing complex reactions from children and clarification of instructions in the educational materials. These findings support the program's continued implementation in Polish educational institutions and indicate its potential in anti-discrimination education.

Key words: stuttering, anti-discrimination education, InterACT program, attitude change, children

Abstrakt: InterACT (ang. Attitude Change and Tolerance) to profilaktyczny program edukacji antydyskryminacyjnej, który promuje postawy akceptacji wobec jękania i różnorodności wśród dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym. Choć skuteczność programu w kształtowaniu adekwatnych postaw została wcześniej potwierdzona, dotąd brakowało badań koncentrujących się na doświadczeniach osób go realizujących. Celem badania było poznanie opinii i doświadczeń osób realizujących program InterACT w Polsce, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem postrzeganych korzyści i trudności. W badaniu uczestniczyli logopedzi, studenci, nauczyciele i psycholodzy, którzy co najmniej raz realizowali program. Zastosowano podejście mieszane obejmujące ankiety ($n = 51$) oraz częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady ($n = 7$). Wyniki badań ilościowych potwierdziły wysoką ocenę programu pod względem użyteczności, intuicyjności oraz pozytywnego wpływu na postawy dzieci wobec jękania i różnorodności. Analiza jakościowa wskazała na możliwość dostosowania programu do potrzeb grupy oraz na kluczową rolę prowadzącego w jego skuteczności. Respondenci zwrócili również uwagę na konieczność uzupełnienia szkolenia o elementy dotyczące radzenia sobie z trudnymi reakcjami dzieci oraz doprecyzowania instrukcji do zadań w materiałach edukacyjnych. Wyniki te wspierają kontynuację wdrażania programu w polskich placówkach edukacyjnych oraz potwierdzają jego potencjał w zakresie edukacji antydyskryminacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: jękanie, edukacja antydyskryminacyjna, program InterACT, zmiana postaw, dzieci

Background and Rationale

Stuttering is a complex speech condition with neurophysiological and genetic underpinnings that affect the timing and coordination of speech (Chang et al., 2019; Etchell et al., 2018; Kraft & Yairi, 2012). Despite what we know about its etiology, there is a pervasive social stigma that can be linked to a lack of public understanding of its causes and characteristics. As a result, people who stutter are often judged as being shy and less confident than people who do not stutter (Boyle, 2013; Gabel, 2015; Langevin, 2015). Research shows that negative attitudes toward stuttering can make it more difficult for people to form relationships, advance in a career, and maintain a good quality of life (Boyle & Blood, 2015; Klompas & Ross, 2004). Additionally, long-term exposure to social stigma can lead to self-stigmatization, causing individuals who stutter to internalize negative societal beliefs. This, in turn, can further worsen their mental well-being and increase emotional distress (Boyle, 2013; Boyle & Fearon, 2018; Hedinger et al., 2021; Langevin, 2015).

Educational programs and public awareness campaigns can play a key role in reshaping social perceptions of stuttering (Boyle, 2017; Boyle & Blood, 2015; Weidner & St. Louis, 2023; Węsierska & Weidner, 2022). These initiatives are essential in reducing stigma and improving the quality of life for those who stutter (Plexico & Burrus, 2012). Studies have shown that promoting positive attitudes toward people who stutter can decrease discrimination and support positive communication environments (Boyle et al., 2016; Langevin et al., 2009a; Langevin et al., 2009b). Given the impact of social stigma, it is crucial to examine how attitudes toward stuttering develop in early childhood and to identify opportunities for early interventions that can guide targeted educational programs and support long-term stigma reduction.

Children's Attitudes Towards Stuttering

Attitudes toward stuttering are formed very early in life. Research suggests that pre-school-aged children who do not stutter can hold unfavorable attitudes toward people who stutter, and negative attitudes may persist throughout the school-aged years (Weidner et al., 2018). A study conducted using the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes-Stuttering/Child (POSHA-S/Child)*, which employs a short animated film and structured questions to evaluate children's attitudes, as well as a pictorial task to assess preferences related to stuttering versus other differences, found that children as young as four years old may hold negative or uninformed beliefs about stuttering (Węsierska & Weidner, 2022). These early negative perceptions are believed to stem from a lack of knowledge about its causes and appropriate ways to respond to people who stutter (Weidner et al., 2015). Negative attitudes in children often include embarrassment, topic-shifting, or ignoring the speaker. Some attempt to "help" by finishing sentences or prompting slower speech (Ezrati-Vinacour et al., 2001; Weidner et al., 2015). Studies show that 73% of Polish children who stutter report being bullied for their speech (Langevin et al., 2016). These attitudes often worsen with age, with school-aged peers more likely to bully or assign lower status to those who stutter (Blood & Blood, 2004; Yaruss et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2008; Langevin et al., 2009a; Langevin, 2009b; Langevin, 2015).

To mitigate negative attitudes and reduce stigmatization, it is essential to disseminate the latest research findings, which suggest that stuttering is a neurophysiological phenomenon with a potential genetic basis (Chang et al., 2019; Etchell et al., 2018; Kraft & Yairi, 2012). In addition, it is important for listeners to understand the holistic experience of stuttering including the sensation of being stuck or losing control of speech, as well as the individual's affective and cognitive responses, the environmental context, and limitations in activity and participation (Tichenor & Yaruss, 2019; Yaruss, 1998; Yaruss & Quesal, 2004).

Over the years, various preventive measures have been implemented to improve public knowledge about stuttering and attitudes toward people who stutter. Examples include the *Teasing and Bullying: Unacceptable Behavior (TAB) program* (Langevin, 2000) and the *Classroom Communication Resource (CCR) intervention* (Mallick et al., 2018), both targeting school-aged children through lessons and activities addressing teasing, bullying, and diversity, with evidence of their effectiveness in fostering empathy and improving attitudes toward stuttering (Langevin, 2000; Langevin & Prasad, 2012; Mallick et al., 2021). Other interventions include the *InterACT program* (Weidner, 2015) and intervention methods utilizing the film *The King's Speech* (Kestenbaum & Khnonov, 2011) or the documentary *MTV True Life: I Stutter* (Schneider, 2007). Educational and preventive initiatives have been shown to improve children's understanding about stuttering and people who stutter. They have also identified the long-term goal to foster a more supportive social environment for individuals who stutter.

InterACT – Attitude Change and Tolerance Program

One such initiative is InterACT (Attitude Change and Tolerance), an anti-discrimination educational program developed by Mary Weidner (2015) to foster positive attitudes toward stuttering and diversity. The program targets preschool and early elementary school-aged children and is based on the core idea that "everyone is different, yet the same." It is comprised of a series of videos using puppetry totaling approximately 20 minutes. The characters use child-friendly language to describe human differences in general as well as stuttering characteristics and causes. The videos are followed by a guided discussion and an activity book, which emphasize the main themes from the videos. Studies have demonstrated statistically significant improvements in children's attitudes toward stuttering following the program, particularly in their ability to recognize helpful and unhelpful responses and their understanding of stuttering (Weidner et al., 2018). The validation study used a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire using the *Public Opinion Survey of Human Attributes-Stuttering/Child (POSHA-S/Ch)* (Weidner & St. Louis, 2014), confirming that the program effectively reduces negative stuttering attitudes in young children (Weidner et al., 2018). After its successful evaluation in the United States, the InterACT program was adapted for use around the world. It has been successfully translated and adapted for cultural conditions in Poland, Slovakia, and Italy (Laciková & Szymczakowska, 2024; Vedovellii et al., 2024; Węsierska & Weidner, 2022).

The adaptation of the InterACT program in Poland began in 2019, accompanied by a study verifying its effectiveness in Polish settings. The methodology followed Weidner's original research design (Weidner et al., 2018), assessing the attitudes of 43 children toward stuttering using a Polish translation of the *POSHA-S/Ch* tool before and after the intervention. Data analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement in children's attitudes after completing the program (Węsierska & Weidner, 2022). Based on the initial success, members and volunteers of the Logopedic Centre Foundation, in collaboration with students from The Research Club of Speech and Language Therapy Students at the University of Silesia, have expanded the dissemination of the program across Poland. They have regularly conducted free webinars for students and professionals (i.e., speech and language therapists, students, educators, and psychologists), which provide information about stuttering and train attendees how to implement the InterACT program. As of February 2025, 593 professionals have participated in these sessions, and the InterACT program has been implemented 139 times across the country (as shown in Figure 1 below). However, it is important to note that the reported number of program implementations reflects only those officially confirmed by the participants. Since verification is voluntary and the materials are available without a time limit, it is likely that unreported implementations have taken place. The successful implementation was made possible through the intensive efforts of the University of Silesia in Katowice and the Logopedic Centre Foundation in promoting the program.

Figure 1

Map of Polish cities where the InterACT program has been implemented (source: www.fcl.org.pl)



While research on the effectiveness of the InterACT program over the years has mainly addressed the topic of changing attitudes among children, little is known about the perspective and perceptions of the professionals who have implemented the program. Given that the program has been most widely used in Poland than any other country, sampling of Polish professionals was determined to provide the most robust feedback. Their experiences can provide valuable insights into the program's impact and contribute to its further development, refinement, and implementation.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of trainers implementing the InterACT program in Poland, based on the trainers' subjective observations and professional reflections. For the purposes of this study, the term *trainers* refers to individuals such as speech and language therapists, students, educators, and psychologists responsible for delivering the program.

The study was guided by the following overarching research questions:

1. How do trainers evaluate the usefulness and accessibility of the InterACT program?
2. How do trainers assess the program's effectiveness in shaping children's attitudes toward stuttering and diversity?
3. What benefits and challenges do trainers identify in the process of implementing the program across various educational settings?
4. How do trainers perceive the program's potential to promote acceptance and inclusivity?

These questions provided a framework for both data collection and analysis, integrating subjective reflections with systematically gathered survey data.

Methods

Study Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of trainers' perspectives on the effectiveness of the InterACT program. The quantitative component included a questionnaire distributed to trainers to collect data on their experiences with the program. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews designed to provide deeper insights into participants' experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of implementing the InterACT program. Integrating these two approaches, the research sought to capture general trends in participant responses and more nuanced, context-rich perspectives. Combining the questionnaire data and the results of the interviews allowed more detailed conclusions to be drawn.

Participants

Trainers involved in the implementation of the InterACT program in Poland took part in the study. For the qualitative component, participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure representation of key professional groups involved in program implementation. For both the qualitative and quantitative parts, participation was voluntary. Recruitment for the quantitative part took place via targeted announcements on Facebook in professional groups for speech and language therapists, educators, specialists, and students, as well as via email invitations sent from the InterACT implementation database by the program administrator. The sample included speech and language therapists, teachers, special educators and speech and language therapy students with varying levels of experience working with children.

Questionnaire Sample. The questionnaire was completed by 51 respondents from various professional backgrounds including speech and language therapists (86.27%), speech and language therapy students (25.49%), and classroom teachers (13.73%). The remaining respondents were psychologists and special education teachers. Some of the respondents hold more than one profession. More than half of the respondents implemented the

InterACT program once, 45.1% of respondents implemented it more than once, and nearly 6% implemented the program more than four times with different groups of children. They have implemented the InterACT program in kindergartens (62.75%), schools (58.82%), and counseling centers (2%). These findings may suggest the respondents' motivation for the cyclical implementation of the program and the need for addressing anti-discriminatory content among preschool and school-aged children. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the research group.

Table 1
Demographic and professional characteristics of survey respondents

	SLT	86.27% ($n = 44$)
Respondents' occupation (multiple responses allowed)	students	25.49% ($n = 13$)
	teacher	13.73% ($n = 7$)
	others	2% ($n = 1$)
Experience	no experience	25.49% ($n = 13$)
	10 years or less	41.17% ($n = 21$)
	more than 10 years	33.33% ($n = 17$)
Implementation count	once	54.9% ($n = 28$)
	2 to 4 times	39.2% ($n = 20$)
	more than 4 times	5.9% ($n = 3$)

Note. SLT – Speech and Language Therapy students

Interview Sample. Seven participants with experience in implementing the InterACT program took part in the semi-structured interviews. To qualify, they had to meet the following criteria: completion of an InterACT training webinar, and at least one prior implementation of the program. Table 2 shows the demographic and professional characteristics of interview participants, including gender, occupation, years of professional experience, number of implementations, place of implementation and years of training.

Table 2
Demographic and professional characteristics of interview participants

Partici- pants	Gender	Occupation	Years of experience	Number of implemen- tation	Place of implementa- tion	Year of training
P1	F	SLT student	0	1	Kindergarten	2024
P2	F	SLT, special educator	30	3	Kindergarten, Primary school	2021
P3	F	SLT	16	11	Kindergarten, Primary school	2021
P4	F	SLT, academic lecturer	40	6	Kindergarten, Primary school	2020
P5	F	SLT student	0	1	Kindergarten	2024
P6	F	SLT, ESS student	2	12	Kindergarten, Primary school	2023
P7	F	SLT	2	10	Primary school	2021

Note. SLT – Speech and Language Therapy students; ESS – European Stuttering Specialization

Procedure

Questionnaire. The study employed a questionnaire, featuring 5-point Likert scale questions (with higher scores indicating more agreement), supplemented by closed-ended single- and multiple-choice questions as well as a few open-ended items. Inclusion criteria required prior completion of the InterACT training and a minimum of one documented implementation of the program. The questionnaire, created using Google Forms, was available from early August to December 2024. Completion took approximately 10 minutes, and the survey was available exclusively in Polish. Participants responded to a total of 19 items in three primary areas: (1) anti-discriminatory education, (2) the required training webinar, and (3) the InterACT program. Regarding anti-discrimination education, participants reported their perceptions for the need to include anti-discrimination content in educational institutions. Regarding the training program, participants reported on its format and their sense of competence to implement the program after the training. With respect to the InterACT program, participants shared their perceptions about the content presented, as well as its comprehensibility and appropriateness for the children's age. Quantitative survey results were analyzed descriptively, and open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively for themes.

Interview. Non-standardized, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants ($n = 7$). All interviews were conducted online via the Microsoft Teams videoconferencing platform. With participants' consent, the meetings were recorded for transcription and further analysis, after which the recordings were deleted. The interviews

lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Each participant signed an informed consent form, and their data remained anonymous throughout the entire research process.

The interviews explored the three main areas that were also addressed in the questionnaire (i.e., anti-discriminatory education, the training program, and the InterACT program). Information about characteristics of the groups to which they implemented the InterACT program, children's reactions and behaviors, and the perceived impact of the program were also discussed. The interviews also explored the overall implementation process, including challenges encountered. Because the questions were open-ended, the interview allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints.

After all interviews were transcribed by one of the authors, the responses were subjected to thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2022). This process comprised six phases: familiarization with the dataset, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Each interview transcript was read twice by the authors, and the original recordings of the conversations were reviewed. During this phase, initial ideas and insights regarding potential themes and recurring patterns in the data emerged. In the subsequent stage, the authors independently analyzed the interview transcripts and assigned preliminary codes to relevant segments of the responses. Once all interviews had been coded, the authors convened to discuss and resolve any discrepancies or uncertainties regarding the applied codes. The initial themes were generated by grouping the identified codes into emerging thematic categories. To support this process, a thematic map was used as a visual aid. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, an external researcher with expertise in thematic analysis was consulted. This individual reviewed all interview transcripts, was familiar with the study's objectives, and assisted the authors in refining the final themes and sub-themes derived from the interviews. Following a final review, clear definitions were established for all themes and sub-themes. Additionally, relevant excerpts were assigned to each thematic category and compiled in a separate document.

Results

Questionnaire Results

Need for Anti-Discrimination Education. Nearly all respondents (98%) indicated the highest possible rating (i.e., 5) on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree) regarding the need to address anti-discrimination topics in an educational setting. These results suggest the legitimacy of adapting the InterACT program to Polish conditions, as well as the need for its ongoing promotion and dissemination. Additionally, the responses align with interview data underscoring the necessity of implementing the InterACT program on a recurring basis.

Evaluation of the Program Content. The majority of respondents (82.4%) strongly agreed that the program's content was useful and valuable. On a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree), 13.7% rated it as a 4 (i.e., agree), while 3.9% assigned

a rating of 3 (i.e., neutral). Notably, none of the respondents rated the content below 3, indicating a generally positive assessment of its relevance and significance. These findings also highlight the need for continued anti-discrimination education in Poland, which is further supported by qualitative interview data.

Ease of Program Implementation. Most participants (72.5%) strongly agreed that the program was intuitive to implement. Furthermore, 21.6% agreed that the program was intuitive to implement, and 5.9% provided a neutral rating. None of the respondents rated the implementation process below 3, suggesting that the program is generally perceived as easy to apply in practice. Notably, the second-largest group of participants in the study consisted of speech and language therapy students, which suggests that the InterACT program is suitable even for therapists with limited experience in working with groups of children. These findings align with the data gathered from interviews.

Children's Reactions to Stuttering. Children's reactions to stuttering at the end of the InterACT workshops, as perceived by the trainers, were mostly positive. A total of 65.5% of respondents observed positive reactions towards stuttering, while nearly one-third (25.9%) reported neutral reactions, and 8.6% observed negative reactions. Respondents also noted variations in how individual children within the same group received the content, which aligns with the interview data, suggesting that children's responses were diverse.

Program Content Comprehensibility. The respondents evaluated whether the content presented in the program was understandable to the children. Using a five-point scale (1 = lack of understanding, and 5 = full comprehension) 49% rated it as a full comprehension. None of the respondents rated children's understanding of the content below 3; 6% chose 3 (partially understandable) and 45% chose 4 (mostly understandable). Since the InterACT program is designed for preschool and early elementary school children, the results may suggest that the content, as well as the method of its delivery, is appropriate for the children's age and developmental level.

Children's Perception of Diversity. One of the key research questions explored whether the InterACT program influenced children's perception of diversity following the program. Nearly 70% of respondents observed a positive change in children's behavior (e.g., actions toward or comments about diverse individuals), while slightly less than 6% noticed no modification in children's behavior. No respondents reported a negative shift in perception. Some participants were uncertain whether any change had occurred. The respondents provided the following verbatim reflections:

- *Children talked among themselves that being different is acceptable and does not affect whether someone is "cool." They also reminded each other not to mock others.*
- *The knowledge gained by children was applied not only to stuttering but also to other aspects, such as a person's weight or background.*
- *Children exhibited greater sensitivity and a willingness to understand and accept differences, recognizing that stuttering is simply a different way of speaking.*
- *The program encouraged open discussions and a desire to help others.*

Given that a primary objective of InterACT is to model positive attitudes toward diversity, these results align with its effectiveness in this area.

Program's Perceived Effectiveness. Participants evaluated the program's impact on children's understanding of stuttering using a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree). More than half of the respondents (54.9%) strongly agreed that the program was effective. None of the participants rated the effectiveness below 3. The analysis of responses suggests that the InterACT program meets its objectives by increasing children's knowledge about stuttering.

Interview Results

As a result of the interviews, five main themes and several subthemes were identified. The first, *InterACT in Poland* encompasses subthemes including the *Need for Anti-Discrimination Interventions*, *Program Popularization*, and *Future Directions*. Second, *About the Trainer*, focuses on the *Trainer's Role in the Program* and *Suggested Activities*. Third, *InterACT Impact on Different Groups* examines how the program influences various stakeholders, including *Impact on Trainers*, *Impact on Children*, and *Impact on the Community*. Fourth, *Program Structure and Potential for Its Development* includes *Feedback on Training*, *Feedback on Materials*, and *Suggested Modifications*. Finally, *Attitudinal Change* captures shifts in perception, particularly *Toward Stuttering* and *Toward Other Forms of Diversity*, underscoring the program's role in fostering greater awareness and inclusivity. Representative quotes within each subcategory, along with a detailed analysis of the findings, are presented below.

Theme 1: InterACT in Poland. In regard to InterACT in Poland, the authors identified three subthemes: *Need for Anti-Discrimination Interventions*, *Program Popularization*, and *Future Directions*. Results are shown in Table 3.

In the subtheme *Need for Anti-Discrimination Interventions*, participants highlighted the persistent need for the implementation of anti-discrimination initiatives. Trainers implementing the InterACT program emphasized that the availability of similar initiatives in Poland remains insufficient. Some of them pointed to the necessity of introducing educational interventions from an early age and regularly reinforcing acquired knowledge to facilitate better retention among children. In their perception, the InterACT program effectively supports early education by promoting anti-discriminatory values.

The subtheme *Program Popularization* was frequently discussed during the interviews. When referring to sources of information about the InterACT training, respondents most often identified academic and scientific communities as key channels of knowledge dissemination. When asked whether they would recommend the program to other specialists, all participants responded affirmatively. Many actively contribute to its promotion by recommending it to colleagues and speech and language therapy students with whom they interact.

Regarding the subtheme *Future Directions*, participants repeatedly emphasized the need for the program's expansion. Some suggested broadening its scope to include more detailed

content and extending its duration beyond a one-time intervention. Additionally, there were calls for adapting the program to older age groups. Speech and language therapists, recognizing the program's effectiveness among younger children, highlighted the importance of continuing these educational efforts with older speech and language therapy students as well.

Table 3*Theme 1: InterACT in Poland*

Subthemes	Exemplary quotes and participant codes
Need for Anti-Discrimination Interventions	<i>The need is, in my opinion, really great for this program to simply keep going all the time. [P3]</i>
Program Popularization	<i>I also told speech and language therapy students that there is such a program. [...] And when they become speech and language therapists, it is simply worth implementing it with children. [P2]</i>
Future Directions	<i>Maybe expand the InterACT program or simply add more stages. Maybe make it more detailed? [P5] [...] It would be great to adapt this program for older groups as well. [P6]</i>

Overall, participants' statements indicate that the need for further implementation and popularization of the InterACT program in Poland remains relevant. This is also reflected in suggestions regarding its expansion and thematic broadening. Trainers implementing the program play a key role in its promotion, and their engagement and positive experiences contribute to its continued dissemination.

Theme 2: About the Trainer. In refining the concept of *About the Trainer*, the authors identified two subthemes: *Trainer's Role in the Program* and *Suggested Activities*. The results are represented in Table 4.

In the subtheme *Trainer's Role in the Program*, participants highlighted the key characteristics and responsibilities of individuals implementing the InterACT program. Trainers emphasized the importance of promoting the values conveyed through the program, such as tolerance and respect. They also stressed the need for flexibility and adaptability in responding to the group's dynamics and specific needs. Each kindergarten and school group is different; therefore, an effective trainer should carefully observe participants, recognize their needs, and tailor their approach accordingly.

The subtheme *Suggested Activities* included practical recommendations and insights from the study participants that support therapists in implementing the InterACT program. Respondents suggested that trainers actively engage with children during activities. Trainers should participate in exercises, such as working with activity books, initiate individual conversations with children, and serve as a source of inspiration for further engagement. Furthermore, program facilitators should not avoid or fear confrontation with challenging behaviors. If undesirable behaviors (e.g., laughter) arise, each instance should be analyzed,

and the trainer should engage in one-on-one discussions with the student involved. An additional recommendation for enriching the program and assessing participants' knowledge was the implementation of group discussions.

Table 4

Theme 2: About the Trainer

Subthemes	Exemplary quotes and participant codes
Trainer's Role in the Program	<i>And it is our role to truly promote this approach – one that includes tolerance and respect. [P4]</i>
Suggested Activities	<i>This is not a program to rush through [...] every behavior, every piece of content needs to be analyzed and ensured that it is well understood. [P6]</i> <i>We approached those tables, giving children some inspiration and ideas. [P1]</i>

The overall analysis of participants' statements underscores the crucial role of the trainer's preparation and engagement in the program's implementation. Trainers guide the educational process and are responsible for effectively conveying its content to children. The findings indicate that methods such as group discussions and the trainer's active involvement in individual tasks notably enhance the learning process and support knowledge retention among children.

Theme 3: InterACT Impact on Different Groups. The main category *InterACT Impact on Different Groups* encompasses three perspectives, which form the subcategories: *Impact on Trainers*, *Impact on Children*, and *Impact on the Community*. The results are displayed in Table 5.

The subcategory *Impact on Trainers* includes perceptions of the program's influence on speech and language therapists and speech and language therapy students, who were responsible for implementing the InterACT program. Trainers evaluated the program as highly relevant to existing needs and very valuable, emphasizing its effectiveness in engaging and activating children. They also noted that participating in the program served as an inspiration for further professional development and stimulated their creativity. According to the speech and language therapy students involved in the study, the InterACT program is an excellent tool even for individuals without prior experience working with children. The respondents reported feeling well-prepared for its implementation and assessed their performance positively, which contributed to increased self-confidence as future speech and language therapists. Some participants noted that the first implementation of the program tends to be the most challenging and is often associated with stress. Additionally, several respondents highlighted that the presence of an experienced facilitator enhanced the sense of security among those with less experience.

When analyzing the *Impact on Children*, trainers frequently emphasized the program's role in fostering openness among children. Based on their observations, this effect was reflected in an improved ability to recognize diversity and a greater willingness to share personal experiences within the group. The respondents noted that the InterACT program enables participants to take on the role of an expert – someone who possesses specific knowledge and can effectively share it with others.

Discussions on the program's influence also led to the identification of the subcategory *Impact on the Community*. Respondents observed that the InterACT program affects not only children but also their broader environment, including teachers and parents. According to their accounts, teachers working with groups in which the program was implemented also benefited from it. Most notably, they expanded their knowledge of stuttering and anti-discrimination education while also learning how to discuss these topics with children effectively.

Table 5

Theme 3: InterACT Impact on Different Groups

Subtheme	Exemplary quotes and participant codes
Impact on Trainers	<p><i>It is a truly beautiful program that can inspire and definitely stimulates the creativity of those implementing it. [P4]</i></p> <p><i>This was our first experience working on a program with a group of children [...] We're glad we took it on because we could both spread this knowledge and test ourselves in the process. I think it's a really great experience. [P1]</i></p>
Impact on Children	<p><i>It was definitely eye-opening for them because, at first, the children had difficulty noticing [...] said diversity. [P1]</i></p> <p><i>We can give children the right to be the expert after this program, so they understand that now they have the ability to go and teach others. [P6]</i></p>
Impact on the Community	<p><i>I get the feeling, when I leave these sessions, that the teachers are very satisfied. The teachers who observe those implementing it, first of all, learn how to talk about all these things. [P3]</i></p>

Overall analysis of participants' statements indicates that the InterACT program has a notable impact on trainers, children, and their environment. Trainers emphasize its value both in working with children and in their own professional development. The program encourages openness among participants, enabling them to share experiences and take on the role of experts. It also influences teachers and parents by broadening their understanding of stuttering and anti-discrimination education.

Theme 4: Program Structure and Potential for Its Development. Within the topic of *Program Structure and Potential for Its Development*, three subthemes were identified: *Feedback on Training*, *Feedback on Materials*, and *Suggested Modifications*. Table 6 provides an overview of the results.

During discussions about the InterACT program, participants frequently addressed technical aspects related to training and educational materials. In analyzing statements concerning *Feedback on Training*, perceptions and experiences related to the training webinar were distinguished. Program facilitators emphasized that, in their view, the provided training was sufficient to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the program. After completing

the training, they felt well-prepared for implementation and saw no need for modifications to the current webinar format. However, some respondents suggested that it would be beneficial to include examples of program modifications and adaptation strategies during the training to better align with different group needs. Speech and language therapy students for whom InterACT was their first experience working with a larger group highlighted that the training was very helpful. Nevertheless, they noted that reviewing all materials and reinforcing acquired knowledge before implementation was advisable.

Regarding *Feedback on Materials*, respondents positively evaluated the visual design of the materials. In their perceptions, the educational resources were structured clearly and accessibly. They particularly emphasized the importance of the implementation guide, which helps organize knowledge and provides a step-by-step walkthrough of the program. A valuable insight from several respondents concerned potential challenges in completing Task 3 of the workbook (instruction: "Draw how you would interact with someone who is different"). Trainers noted that, based on their experience, some children found this instruction too abstract or difficult at first. They suggested that a more detailed explanation at the beginning would be beneficial, along with role-playing activities illustrating different ways of establishing contact with others.

One of the most frequently recurring themes was *Suggested Modifications* to the InterACT program. Respondents often emphasized the possibilities for personalizing the program and the flexibility it offers. Facilitators, familiar with the characteristics of the groups they worked with, sought to consider their specific needs and potential challenges. Some trainers incorporated discussions on topics such as aphasia, selective mutism, and hearing impairments, as these issues were relevant to their particular groups. They highlighted that the core message of the InterACT program, which promotes acceptance and discourages discrimination, allowed them to tailor certain aspects of the sessions to better suit their participants. Additionally, some trainers introduced modifications to the duration or format of activities, adapting them based on the age and abilities of the children. Respondents emphasized that despite these minor adaptations, the program effectively fulfills its objectives, and tailoring it to the specific group further enhances children's ability to absorb the material.

Table 6*Theme 4: Program Structure and Potential for Its Development*

Subthemes	Exemplary quotes and participant codes
Feedback on Training	<i>The free webinar is definitely a huge plus. In just one hour, you can learn a lot of things, and I also think that an additional benefit is the fact that the topic has been expanded not only to stuttering but also to the issue of the arrival of children from Ukraine. [P7]</i>
Feedback on Materials	<i>Even before I implemented the first program, I eagerly read the instructions because it explained everything step by step in a great way. [P6]</i>
Suggested Modification	<i>The more we personalize this program for the children we work with, the easier it is for them to understand, accept, and also to change attitudes in the classroom. [P6]</i> <i>I introduced modifications regarding, among other things, communication, because there were also children in this group with aphasia or children who do not speak at all [...] and here, with this example, we can show that just because someone uses alternative communication, such as gestures, pictograms, or another form of alternative communication, it doesn't change their ability to participate. [P3]</i>

Overall, the analysis of data related to *Program Structure and Potential for Its Development* demonstrated that technical aspects, such as training and materials, are perceived as clear and accessible by facilitators. Respondents also appreciated the flexibility of the InterACT program and its potential for modification. They emphasized that, while maintaining the core structure and content, it is beneficial to incorporate topics and issues relevant to the specific group during discussions.

Theme 5: Attitudinal Change. A key objective of the study was to explore the theme of *Attitudinal Change*. The thematic analysis identified two subthemes related to attitude shifts: *Toward Stuttering* and *Toward Other Forms of Diversity*. The outcomes are summarized in Table 7.

In the context of discussing stuttering during the implementation of the InterACT program, some respondents noted that for certain children, this was their first exposure to the topic. Trainers emphasized that the program provided children with immediate access to factual and reliable information about stuttering. Many respondents recalled that when a stuttering character appeared in the video materials, children initially exhibited undesirable reactions such as laughter, smiling, or mimicry. However, they observed that due to appropriate intervention by trainers or the influence of the program and its conveyed values, these behaviors gradually diminished by the end of the sessions.

Participants also described instances in which a child who stutters was present during program implementation. Trainers highlighted the importance of obtaining consent from both the child and their parents before addressing the topic. They also stressed the need to respect the child's decision if they chose not to participate in the sessions but still wished for their classmates to be informed about stuttering. Additionally, some trainers reported that in certain cases, children who stuttered took on the role of "experts" within

the group, openly sharing their experiences with their peers. According to respondents, the program provides valuable information about stuttering and can effectively contribute to changing children's attitudes. However, some participants – mainly the speech and language therapy students who had only one-time contact with the group – were unable to determine whether these attitude changes had long-term effects.

Beyond the aspect of stuttering, respondents also observed changes in children's attitudes toward other forms of diversity. According to some participants, children demonstrated an increased awareness of differences in their surroundings and the characteristics that make individuals unique. Some teachers reported noticeable changes in children's reactions, highlighting greater knowledge and acceptance of diversity. However, as in the case of stuttering, not all trainers were able to fully assess the sustainability of these changes, as they implemented the program only once and did not have the opportunity for follow-up interactions with the group.

Table 7

Theme 5: Attitudinal Change

Subthemes	Exemplary quotes and participant codes
Toward Stuttering	<p><i>A few times, it happened that someone started laughing just at the reaction to stuttering. Or there were some smirks, even if it wasn't open laughter. And that changed. Later on, it wasn't there anymore. [P2]</i></p> <p><i>As for an appropriate attitude towards stuttering, they acquire the knowledge of how to behave and which behaviors will be helpful when interacting with a person who stutters, and this program guarantees that these two sessions are sufficient for that. [P7]</i></p>
Toward other Forms of Diversity	<p><i>It seems to me that this was new for the children [...] I don't think that anyone had talked to them about it in more detail. [P5]</i></p> <p><i>We see these differences and we also get feedback from the class tutors, who notice the change and see the differences in the children's reactions. [P6]</i></p>

A detailed overall analysis of *Attitudinal Change* demonstrated that the InterACT program is effective in shaping attitudes toward stuttering and other forms of diversity. Respondents indicated that while undesirable reactions to stuttering may initially occur, appropriate intervention can lead to notable attitude changes.

Discussion

Utility of the InterACT Program

This study solicited feedback from 51 Polish trainers (i.e., professionals and trained pre-professionals) who implemented the InterACT program in educational settings throughout Poland to assess the program's utility, perceived impact, and identify opportunities for

programmatic refinement. Given that this study was the first to use the InterACT program across an entire country, trainers' feedback regarding programmatic feasibility is critical to identify and address barriers or enablers so that future program modifications can be made. In addition, the degree to which they see the value of the program is directly tied to the fidelity of implementation and ultimately, measurable outcomes. The qualitative and quantitative findings further confirm the program's efficacy to improve stuttering attitudes in young children as well as its utility in the Polish context relative to its adherence to inclusive education and practical application.

Efficacy of Attitude Improvement

Although previous studies have confirmed the use of the InterACT program based on quantitative pre-post POSHA-S/Child data in the US, Poland, and Slovakia (Laciková & Szymczakowska, 2024; Weidner et al., 2018; Węsierska & Weidner, 2022), this study is the first to contribute research on the experiences of individuals implementing the InterACT program. More than half of the respondents "strongly agreed" the program was effective, which supports previous research on its efficacy to improve children's stuttering attitudes (Laciková & Szymczakowska, 2024; Weidner et al., 2018; Węsierska & Weidner, 2022). Not surprisingly, trainers' observations of the children watching the InterACT videos suggest there was an inverse relationship with children's overt reactions toward the stuttering character and their knowledge about stuttering; unhelpful and unsupportive reactions (e.g., laughing and mocking) decreased as children's knowledge about stuttering increased. This finding supports previous research suggesting that knowledge about stuttering is directly tied to reactions toward it (Weidner et al., 2018), and that cognitive understanding of a condition is a strong driver of improved attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A vast majority of trainers reported positive change in children's perceptions toward diversity following the program. Interestingly, some trainers reported that children's positive attitudes extended to differences not represented in the program (e.g., weight, ethnicity). This exciting finding suggests that the InterACT program may create a "secondary transfer effect" (Pettigrew, 2009) that positively influences children's attitudes toward human differences that are not explicitly highlighted in the program. Additional follow-up studies involving children's self-reported attitudes and trainers' observations would need to confirm this finding.

Inclusive Education

The InterACT program is particularly relevant and timely in Poland, given the country-wide effort to improve anti-discrimination and inclusivity education (Buchowski & Chlewińska, 2012; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). Polish classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse due to expansion of services for children with special needs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022), refugee and immigrant populations (Domalewska & Żakowska, 2019), and increased mixed ethnic identities (Statistics Poland, 2024). Therefore, helping children tolerate and accept human differences is paramount. Inclusive education in Poland seeks to equip educators, school administrators, and other educational professionals with the skills and knowledge

necessary to create equitable and supportive learning environments. Nearly all trainers in this study affirmed the need for anti-discrimination programming in the Polish education system, which further provides evidence for general alignment with this movement among educational professionals and pre-professionals.

The InterACT program aligns with this broader national movement because it supports children's emotional social development and promotes supportive peer environments by normalizing human differences and providing a model for how to ask about others' differences with curiosity and respect (Weidner, 2015). Further, it trains children how to interact with people who stutter, which is hoped to neutralize negative or uninformed listener responses that have been shown to occur even among young children (Langevin, 2015). Trainers reported that the InterACT program should be implemented on an ongoing basis or expanded into different themes, so tolerance and inclusion can be continually emphasized.

Ease of Implementation and Flexibility

In the Polish educational system, time and resources for specialized training for new programs are often constrained. Therefore, it is essential that any new educational program should be based on reliable content, developmentally appropriate, and feasible to implement in terms of time and resource requirements. Aboud and Levy (2000) claim that to change children's attitudes programs must be flexible to adapt to children's developmental levels, cultural backgrounds, and the specific nature of the attitudes being addressed, and that one-size-fits-all approaches are less likely to succeed than flexible interventions. In alignment with those features, 94% of trainers agreed or strongly agreed that the InterACT program was easy to implement, with many reporting on its flexibility of the program and adaptability. Trainers noted that they can expand conversations based on relevant differences represented in their own classroom setting. This finding is encouraging, as teachers may be able to use adapted versions of the InterACT program as a springboard for general anti-discrimination programming. The study results further indicated that the program can be effectively implemented by trained students and clinicians, thus expanding its potential reach.

Several practical suggestions for programmatic refinement were elucidated. Respondents indicated it would have been useful to have training on how to adapt the program to the diversity represented in their own classroom. They also inquired about how to intervene if children demonstrated unfavorable reactions toward the stuttering characters, such as laughter or mocking. Finally, there were isolated comments indicating that one of the tasks in the workbook may pose difficulties for children. All of these topics should be incorporated into future training webinars, so that trainers can be prepared to productively deal with the unique needs of their own groups.

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the limitations of this study is the composition of the research sample, particularly the participants of the qualitative interviews. The interview respondents included

only speech and language therapists and speech and language therapy students, whereas the InterACT program in Poland is also implemented by educators and psychologists. Incorporating their perspectives could enrich the analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences associated with program implementation. Furthermore, although the interview participants varied in terms of their professional experience and number of program implementations, the current study did not include a comparative analysis of how these factors may have influenced their perceptions. This remains an important direction for future research. Additionally, increasing the number of survey respondents could yield a more representative assessment of the program and inform its continued refinement. Some trainers noted that evaluating the program's effectiveness was challenging due to the lack of follow-up contact with the group after its implementation. It is recommended that an external trainer¹ seek feedback from teachers, which will allow for a better assessment of the program's effectiveness in a given group.

Conclusion

In this study, the InterACT program was implemented 139 times across Poland, involving dozens of trainers. This makes it the largest-scale use of the program in any country to date. Based on the results, the trainers that implemented the program reported positively on the program's value and utility to improve children's stuttering attitudes and enhance inclusive and anti-discrimination education. Speech and language therapists, related helping professionals, and/or trained students in relevant fields can utilize the program in classroom settings with the ultimate aim to foster more inclusive communication environments for children who stutter. It is hoped that programming, such as the InterACT program, will contribute to larger initiatives that promote inclusivity and tolerance for stuttering and other human differences.

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¹ External Trainer – a specialist implementing the InterACT program outside their home institution, without prior knowledge of the group or its knowledge level. Their role is limited to program delivery, usually with no direct post-session contact with the teacher and no feedback on the effectiveness of the intervention.

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