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Challenges for teachers and special pedagogy teachers working with students with special educational needs

Introduction

Research conducted by M. Bogdanowicz (1995) showed that as much as 20% of the student population are children with special educational needs. This term refers to a group of students who, in comparison with their peers, have significantly more learning difficulties in the public school conditions. In order to continue learning in a regular school, they require additional pedagogical “treatment”¹ by the teachers (Kopek-Putała, 2015), for instance, special curriculum, as well as special teaching methods and forms. Sometimes they should also be taught by a specialist teaching staff under appropriate organizational conditions (Bogdanowicz, 1995). In such a situation, the teacher should seek support from a special pedagogy teachers whose interest lies in solving education and upbringing problems (Śliwerski, 2006: VIII).

Comprehensive preparation of special pedagogy teachers and supporting teachers for education of students with special educational needs (hereinafter referred to as SEN) is an extremely demanding and difficult task. During university studies, future teachers of the aforementioned specializations, in addition to the main subjects within pedagogy (including special pedagogy), also have a course on issues in the scope of humanities and social sciences, as regulated in the Annex to the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 4 November 2011 – Model Educational Results for the field of study of pedagogy, first cycle studies of the general academic profile (Journal of Laws). These effects include, among others, issues related to the student (including the SEN student) (Tab. 1).

Unfortunately, in this Annex, there is no information about the student’s knowledge of mathematical and natural sciences, in which the specificity of teaching-learning (e.g. chemistry, cf. Nodzyńska, 2004) is significantly different from the specificity of work in the humanities subjects such as Polish or history. Introducing a block of mathematical and natural issues could help to understand the learning disabilities that the SEN student experiences in such classes. SEN students often

¹ Not every kind of child’s disability classifies them for integrated education, inclusive education or special education. The decision of a psychological and pedagogical counseling center, and not the opinion of this center or medical certificate, entitles to it.

Tab. 1. Model Educational Results for the field of study of pedagogy, first cycle studies of the general academic profile

Graduate e.g.:
<p>K_U02 can use basic theoretical knowledge of pedagogy and related disciplines to analyze and interpret educational, (...) and supporting problems (...),</p> <p>K_U10 can use basic theoretical approaches to analyze, interpret, and design pedagogical strategies, generate solutions to specific pedagogical problems and predict the course of their solution, as well as predict the effects of planned actions,</p> <p>K_U11 can animate work on the development of participants of pedagogical processes and support their autonomy in gaining knowledge, as well as inspire them to work towards lifelong learning,</p> <p>K_K02 (...) uses the knowledge gained to design a career path,</p> <p>K_K03 is convinced of the sense, value and the need to undertake pedagogical activities in a social setting, is ready to tackle professional challenges, demonstrates activity, takes up the effort and is characterized by perseverance in the realization of individual and team professional activities in the field of pedagogy,</p> <p>K_K08 responsibly prepares for their work, designs and performs pedagogical activities.</p>

need multidisciplinary support in the teaching-learning process. This leads to the necessity for supporting teachers or educators to have quite a diverse and extensive knowledge. A graduate of special pedagogy should have interdisciplinary knowledge, among others, related to broadly understood development. They should also possess the knowledge and methodological skills in designing and conducting educational, rehabilitative and social reintegration activities in special education and use this knowledge in practical situations (cf. graduate profile).

The above-presented description shows how the special education graduate should be prepared in theory – but is it really so? In many scientific and educational centers (e.g. Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw, The University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz, Postgraduate Education Center in Lodz, Educational Center for Teachers w Poznan or Education Development Center in Warsaw), one can find an offer of postgraduate studies, courses, and trainings on support of teachers and educators working with children with SEN. Such an offer of professional development may indicate that there is a need to deepen the scope of competence by teachers and educators. It also demonstrates that the problem of adequate education of SEN students exists and is still up to date. There is also a rich subject literature, which deals with the issue of working with children with SEN (e.g. Klaczak, Majewicz, 2006, Grzywniak, 2012, Thompson, 2013, Olechowska, 2016, Cytowska, 2017, Improving the effectiveness of education MEN). However, in the subject literature, it is difficult to find research on the subjective assessment by graduates of their competence in this topic. Thus, the question arises: Do “teachers-specialists” actually feel prepared for interdisciplinary support of the development of SEN students in humanities and natural sciences subjects in public schools?

Research methodology

The research carried out was a continuation of a comprehensive research conducted in the years 2012–2015 (e.g. Kopek-Putała, 2012, 2016; Kopek-Putała, Nodzyńska, 2015; Kopek-Putała, Bílek, 2017). The research involved working with

a student with generalized learning difficulties diagnosed by a psychological and pedagogical counseling center. The study was preceded by an analysis, among others, of available opinions and decisions regarding the student, and the collection of information from teachers of various subjects teaching this student, including the school pedagogue, using the questionnaire. In the course of the research, it turned out that teachers and educators working with the student also notice their learning difficulties and learning outcomes, which are well below the average. This led to a research question: What is the preparation of supporting teachers to work with students with specific learning disabilities?

H_0 (resulting from Model Educational Results for the field of study of pedagogy) Special pedagogy teachers are well prepared to perform tasks related to the education of students with SEN.

H_1 Special pedagogy teachers do not feel well prepared to perform tasks related to the education of students with SEN.

The study was conducted in 2016 among 78 students in the second year of special pedagogy at one of the universities in Poland.

Methods, techniques and tools

The method employed in the study was a diagnostic survey using a questionnaire technique. As a research tool, a questionnaire prepared using the Google Docs was applied (eg. Paśko, Nodzyńska, 2008; Nodzyńska, et al., 2013). It consisted of 30 questions: 11 open (short or long answer) and 19 closed (one choice). For this analysis, 5 questions (3 closed and 2 open) were chosen, which show the students' opinions and feelings on the learning of the student with SEN. All respondents answered the questions discussed. Other questions from the questionnaire are planned to be discussed in subsequent publications.

Results

The first of the questions discussed concerned the opinion of the respondents and it was phrased as follows: *Do you think that the teachers of specific subjects feel the need for teaching support from the school pedagogue and psychologist?* This was a single-choice closed question with two answers.

About two thirds (53) of respondents believe that teachers of specific subjects feel the need for teaching support from the school pedagogue and psychologist, while one third (25) of respondents think that support is not needed for teachers. Since many of the respondents will probably work as supporting teachers or school pedagogue (whom teachers will ask for help) – the result seems to be at least weird. It is important to consider whether the respondents representing such opinions properly chose their field of studies and their future life path.

The second question asked was: *Do you feel competent to provide support for a teacher as part of the SEN student education?* This was a single-choice closed question with six answers. The questionnaire answers were prepared according to the modified Likert scale, removing the most neutral statement from the questionnaire and adding the most extreme statements (excellent and unprepared).

The analysis of the results obtained indicates that none of the students surveyed feels very well prepared to support the teacher in educating students with SEN. Only three respondents assess their preparation as very good, one fourth (20) think it is good, 34 respondents think they are prepared poorly, 15 respondents consider their preparation as very poor, and 6 do not feel prepared to meet this challenge. The results of the study show that nearly half of the respondents evaluate their competence as low. This result should be regarded as disturbing. If the special pedagogy teacher is not convinced of their competences in working with SEN students, who can the subject teacher expect specialized help from while working every day at school?

In order to estimate the results, the answers to this question were grouped into two categories:

- category I: **competent**, including answers: excellent, very good or good preparation – about one third of respondents (23),
- category II: **incompetent**, including answers: poor, very poor or lack of preparation – about two thirds of respondents (55).

Such a grouping of answers indicates that twice as many people feel incompetent to provide support for a teacher as part of the SEN student education as those who feel competent. The students' responses to this question are adequate to the answer to the first question – students may actually feel incompetent (answer to question two) because they do not know what future work requirements will be, that is, supporting other teachers in the teaching process (answer to question one).

The next question was about the opinions of the respondents and it was an open question phrased as follows: *What do you think the expectations of the teachers in terms of support of the educational process of SEN students by the educator are?* Many different answers were given that have been classified into seven categories for analysis purposes.

The answers to the question are as follows: seven respondents believe that teachers expect close cooperation and consultation with the educator (hereinafter referred to as consultation), about one fifth (15) respondents believe that they need an effective diagnosis and guidelines for work (hereinafter referred to as diagnosis and guidelines), 28 respondents believe that teachers expect methodological assistance – the development of appropriate methods, forms or teaching resources, and 13 respondents think that the teachers expect alignment of the students' learning gaps, among others, through corrective and compensatory work, as well as assistance for teacher in working with such a student (hereinafter referred to as alignment of learning gaps). Only eight respondents do not know what teachers can expect, and only four respondents believe that they expect assistance in behavior oriented matters (hereinafter referred to as assistance at student's behavior), whereas the remaining three respondents gave vague answers unrelated to the categories mentioned above (hereinafter referred to as other).

After grouping responses into three categories, the following results were obtained:

- Category I: **theoretical information support**, including answers: consultation, diagnosis and guidelines – 22 respondents,

- Category II: **practical assistance** including answers: methodological and behavioral assistance, alignment of learning gaps – 45 respondents,
- Category III: **unspecified**, including answers: “I do not know” and other – 11 respondents.

Students’ responses show that most of them are aware that the subject teacher primarily expects practical help. A teacher with passion and commitment can find theoretical information in the literature themselves.

The next question was about the feelings of the respondents and was phrased as follows: *Do you feel equipped not only with the theoretical knowledge of the didactic process of students with SEN but also with practical solutions to support the teacher in working with such students?* This was a single-choice closed question with four answers. In this question, the Likert scale was again modified to 4 points – removing the neutral response.

The answers to the question are as follows: 56 respondents believe that they are prepared theoretically and practically for the didactic process of students with SEN to a slight extent, while 12 respondents believe that they are prepared for it to a large extent. 5 people perceive their preparation positively (answer “yes”), and the same number of respondents feel unprepared theoretically and practically (answer “no”) for the process of educating students with SEN.

After grouping responses into two categories, the following results were obtained:

- Category I: **prepared**, including answers: “yes” and “to a large extent” – 17 respondents,
- Category II: **unprepared**, including answers: “no” and “to a slight extent” – 61 respondents.

It can therefore be stated that the number of students unprepared is more than 3 times higher than that of those who are prepared. Student responses are again adequate to the answers to the question 1 – they may in fact feel insufficiently competent to meet one of the major challenges they will face in the future work.

The last of the questions analyzed was an open question and concerned *the expectations of the students on the education of students with SEN when they started their studies*. A variety of responses were provided, which for the purposes of analysis were preliminarily classified into seven categories. One half (41) of respondents expected transferring the theoretical knowledge into practical solutions (hereinafter referred to as theory to practice), 11 future teachers expected case studies and demonstration of an alternative model to traditional SEN student teaching (hereinafter referred to as case studies and alternative), and 6 respondents expected more practical exercises at school (hereinafter referred to as school practice). Nine respondents could not specify their expectations or did not have them (hereinafter referred to as “I do not know”), six respondents had expectations classified into the category other, three respondents thought that teaching SEN students was easier (simple), whereas two people described their expectations as high.

Subsequently, responses were grouped into the following categories:

- Category I: **theory**, including answers: case studies and alternative – 11 respondents,

- Category II: **practical skills**, including answers: school practice and theory to practice – 47 respondents,
- Category III: **unspecified**, including answers: “I do not know” and other – 15 respondents,
- Category IV: **description of feelings**, including answers: simple and high – 5 respondents.

Responses are again adequate to the answers to question three – the practical skills of educators are most expected in the education of SEN students.

Conclusions

The students surveyed (mostly) are aware of the need for cooperation and support of school teachers in the education of SEN students. Respondents provide a wide range of support that subject teachers may expect from them, however, they do not believe that they have the necessary competences (especially practical) to identify the SEN students' needs and help those teachers. More than half of the surveyed students starting the studies expect academic and school teachers to transfer their theoretical knowledge into concrete practical solutions needed to work with this type of youth.

Implications

Regarding the presented results, conducting a study among the first year students can be considered: with what expectations (adequate or not) and attitude students start the pedagogical studies with respect to the model educational results. Awareness of the feelings that students have may be an additional driving force to consider the need to partially update the curriculum of pedagogical studies. It is true that science and education centers have a number of additional training programs for teachers and educators preparing them for work at school (including work with students with different educational needs), but this requires changes in higher education programs (...) (Child with disabilities). The recommended updating should focus on the specificity of teaching mathematical and natural sciences as well as practical issues in working with SEN students. Education programs for future educators should include a greater number of practical activities (Practical Student Preparation Recommendations) and examples. It is also important to consider the reverse action, that is enriching the teacher's studies within particular subjects with a series of classes devoted to working with a student with developmental deficits of varying degrees of severity. An interesting solution would be creating a study profile that would enable the education of a teacher having two majors whose primary field of study would be complemented with specialization in the teaching of students with SEN. Possessing such a broad competence by the principal teacher could help in effective collaboration with the school educator and overcoming educational barriers among students with SEN.

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Abstract

The first part of the article explains the essence of the concept of special educational needs (and relates it to the educators) whose interest is focused on these kinds of problems. The second part discusses the results of the study on the perceptions and opinions of special pedagogy students about the education of learners with specific learning disabilities and describes the conclusions of the study. The study has shown that special pedagogy students believe that they do not have sufficient (especially practical) knowledge to teach students with specific learning disabilities and to cooperate with teachers working in public schools and educating such students.

Key words: specific learning disabilities, special pedagogy, subject teacher, pedagogue, research

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