

# The manifestation of student teachers' knowledge, understanding, emotions, and experiences in their essays about special needs

Krista Uibu<sup>a1</sup>, Helin Puksand<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Institute of Education, University of Tartu*

<sup>b</sup> *School of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University*

## Summary

### Introduction

The implementation of inclusive education means there are more children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms. Therefore, teachers should have knowledge and understanding about special needs and how to deal with them. The lack of knowledge about special needs is one of the biggest problems in Estonian schools (Übius et al., 2014). However, a good knowledge and understanding support the formation of positive attitudes and professional behaviour and form the future teachers' awareness about inclusive education.

Successful engagement relies on the idea that people are different (Vuran, 2014). Therefore, teachers have to know what age-appropriate child development is and which signs indicate special needs. Teachers' attitudes and understanding affect the readiness for inclusion (Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2013; Norwich, 2002). Teachers who have a positive attitude toward inclusion of students with special needs are able to adapt better to the tasks and the curriculum, taking into account the specific and individual needs of students (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Swain et al., 2012). Knowing student teachers' understanding about special needs and experiences with these, we can develop positive attitudes and provide them with evidence-based methods to teach all students (Swain et al., 2012).

The aim of this study is to investigate how student teachers describe their knowledge, understanding, emotions, and experiences of various special needs. The following three study questions were formulated:

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education, University of Tartu, Salme 1a, 50103 Tartu, Estonia; krista.uibu@ut.ee

1. What knowledge, understanding, emotions and experiences are expressed in thematic essays about special needs?
2. What kind of differences emerge in students' descriptions about knowledge and understanding, emotions and experiences according to different types of special needs?
3. What are the typical relations between different types of special needs and students' knowledge, understanding, emotions and experiences?

### **Method**

Within the framework of the study, 218 student teachers from 21 programmes of two Estonian universities participated in the survey. This article analyses their thematic essays, written on the basis of books about different kind of special needs. According to the topics of the books, seven sub-groups of special needs were differentiated: 1) autism, 2) dyslexia, 3) intellectual disability, 4) behavioural problems, 5) sensory disabilities, 6) physical disability and 7) disease (e.g., cancer). The thematic essays were analysed by using an inductive content analysis (Schreier, 2012), sentences or sets of sentences that expressed a conceptual whole were used as analytic units. Four main categories emerged from the data: 1) knowledge about special needs, 2) understanding connected to special needs, 3) emotions related to special needs, 4) experiences with special needs. By using variable and person-oriented approaches to the data, analyses were employed to provide more comprehensive information (Bergman et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 2007).

### **Main results and discussion**

It appeared that students described their understanding about intellectual and physical disabilities more multifariously than understanding about dyslexia and autism. However, they were less detailed in their descriptions about experiences with behavioural problems and dyslexia. On the one hand, the formation of understanding is influenced by previous experiences (Kagan, 1992) and that is the reason why students describe their understanding about intellectual and physical disabilities more than behavioural problems and dyslexia. On the other hand, where severe intellectual and physical disabilities are visible; behavioural problems and dyslexia are invisible disabilities (Black, 2004; Carter & Spencer, 2006). Therefore, students describe their understanding about visible disabilities more variously.

We were also interested in differences in students' knowledge, understanding, emotions and experiences. Contrary to our assumption, differences in students' knowledge and emotions according to the types of special needs were not

found. The reason might be that the thematic essay about books is not suitable for testing knowledge (see also Vuran, 2014). Continuing from the previous point, the students expressed their understanding about learning difficulties – autism and dyslexia – less than concerning intellectual and physical disabilities. Severe intellectual and physical disabilities have very clear signs (Kirk et al., 2003), so their detection is easier as compared to other special needs. This may be the reason why more students expressed their understanding about these special needs more profoundly. Comparing students' experiences with special needs, we found that their contacts with behavioural problems were described significantly superficially in the essays compared to their experiences with autism and physical disabilities. In addition, their experiences with physical disabilities were described in more detail than their contacts with dyslexia.

Additionally, based on person-oriented approach, students' understanding, emotions and experiences were related to the types of special needs. Altogether, by using the configural frequency analysis (CFA version 2000; von Eye, 2000) altogether four types and one antitype were indicated. There were more students than expected by chance who described their understanding about dyslexia more superficially. Furthermore, there were more students than expected by chance who described their understanding about physical disabilities more carefully. As the signs of learning disabilities are often hidden, the teachers did not recognise them (Washburn et al., 2014). Interesting results also appeared when analysing students' emotions about special needs. More students than could be expected by chance described their emotions about autism very modestly. Additionally, less students than expected represented their emotions with autism on the average level. The reason might be that students do not have enough knowledge of autism and experience with it (Mavropoulou & Padeliaadu, 2000; Toran et al., 2016).

The research results allow the following recommendations and implications. First, writing essays is an effective method for finding out about students' understanding, experiences and emotions, but this method is not suitable for the knowledge control. Second, the courses of special needs should focus more on invisible disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, behavioural disability), because otherwise the teachers do not notice them and cannot use the right methods. Third, to develop an entire system of knowledge, understanding, and experiences, the theoretical course of special needs should be related with practice (Swain et al., 2012).

*Keywords:* teacher training, special needs, understanding, experiences, thematic essay