# A comparison of general education students and special education students in terms of self-efficacy and hopelessness

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# A COMPARISON OF GENERAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN TERMS OF SELF-EFFICACY AND HOPELESSNESS

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this study was to compare general education students and special education students in terms of self-efficacy and sense of hopelessness. Two hypotheses were put forward. Hypothesis 1: Special education students have higher levels of self-efficacy than general education students. Hypothesis 2: Special education students have lower levels of hopelessness than general education students. None of the hypotheses was confirmed. Study showed that there were no differences between general education students and special education students. The survey was conducted in December 2016 and January 2017. The questionnaires were filled by 355 students. Self-efficacy was measured on a self-report, 2-item scale. Hopelessness was measured on 4-item, self-report Short Hopelessness Scale* (*Beck, A. T., Weissman, A., Lester, D., Trexler, L.).*

**Keywords:** *hopelessness, general education students, self-efficacy*

## 1. Introduction

Matching personality to a suitable profession is crucial from the perspective of a good job and career opportunities. Incongruity to one's profession can cause less satisfaction and in consequence, worse relationships with colleagues, slower development and perception of negative emotions [1].

For teachers, the profession matching factor can be crucial not only for the functioning of a person as an employee but also in the functioning of his pupils. In this article, we would like to present a study about the differences between general education students and special education students in terms of self-efficacy and sense of hopelessness.

Features such as hopelessness and self-efficacy seem to be particularly important while working with children with developmental disabilities, mental disorders and special learning needs. Such children need a teacher who will be able to give them support and the sense of stability. As pupils with difficulties face various problems with building relationships, the teacher's self-efficacy and low level of hopelessness might help students overcome these barriers. A person who exhibits low self-efficacy and high hopelessness may have a problem with persistence in difficult conditions, which will undoubtedly accompany working with children with special needs. It is less relevant in the case of a general educator who is responsible to a greater extent for substantive activities, but social component and building lasting and deep relationships with students is not so demanding for him.

Being a teacher requires not only certain formal qualifications, but also interpersonal skills and relevant personality traits. In particular, it applies to the teachers working with disabled children. It is assumed that for the role of the teacher predetermines characteristics such as self-control, patience, and emotional balance [2]. Frequently, the expected features of a good teacher are: relating to others, a friendly manner, well-rounded education, extensive knowledge, justice, self-control, honesty and pleasant disposition [3]. Mostly, these are typical social skills. Students claim that qualities of teachers such as kindness, honesty and ability to establish contacts have a decisive impact on their sense of security and are the basis of building contacts with both the teachers and other members of the class and the school community [3].

Moreover, teachers should possess certain diagnostic skills in order to recognize students' potential, abilities, interests, and limitations [4]. Diagnosis is an essential part of the education process, so the ability to diagnose seems to be one of the core competences of the teacher [5]. In addition, pursuing the profession of teacher requires continuous professional development [6].

In the literature, there are several pedagogical paradigms about features of an ideal special educator. K. Plutecka has divided the paradigms into the following groups: the paradigm of a human nature, the paradigm of motivating authority, the paradigm of self-education, the paradigm of responsibility, the paradigm of support for a person who helps children, and also the paradigm of self-awareness [7]. According to the paradigm of humanity, special education teachers are more likely to use the individual teaching skills in their profession if they act in accordance with their inner nature. What is more, a special educator should be an ethical person [7]. According to another paradigm, a special education teacher should be a motivating authority for both his pupils and their parents. The success of a special educator depends on the respect that he or she manages to get in his or her environment. Special educator should have the moral and intellectual authority and must be a person of trust [7]. The paradigm of self-education mainly covers the continuous development of special education teachers' competence. Special educator - in line with this point of view - should be a person focused on continuous improvement of himself and preparing his or her students for self-education [7]. Development of professional skills should also be linked to the improvement of ethics. In the paradigm of sense of

responsibility, the main emphasis is put on responsibility for educating and upbringing of disabled people. Therefore, a special education teacher must know his students and must have some interpersonal skills, including empathy and respect for the student [7]. Special educator must have a mature personality, because this is a prerequisite for the development of pupils. The paradigm of support for a person who helps children pays special attention to the problems and ethical dilemmas which a special educator must deal with. Being a teacher requires struggling with one's own weaknesses and understanding oneself [7]. In the paradigm of self-actualization, the emphasis is put on breaking the routine at work of a special education teacher [7].

## 1.2 Self-efficacy

One of the most important agents which makes teachers' work more effective is educators' sense of self-efficacy which, according to A. Bandura, means "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" [8]. In other words, self-efficacy changes individuals' motivation, affecting aims they want to achieve, determines the period of time in which people endure all the obstacles, how hard they endeavor to succeed and how persistent they are while struggling with the lack of success, which contributes to high level of performance [9]. This conclusion has been proved by the positive association between beneficial self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance which has been found among students [10][11]. In educational contexts, teacher's self-efficacy means the educator's conviction about his skills concerning teaching the students in a successful way. This is a concept which makes teachers use their capabilities to increase students' acquisition of knowledge as educators who feel self-efficient experience more perseverance which result in better schooling abilities [12]. This factor mediates between teachers' aims and efforts turned to fulfilling various tasks [13]. The teacher's self-efficacy plays an important role as it influences students' performance in a positive way [14][15][16].

A distinctive group of educators are special education teachers whose work is inseparably connected with great emotional and physical burden as they have to use specialized skills in their everyday work with children who are affected by numerous disabilities and who have many different needs. Moreover, these educators are supposed to put greater effort into achieving learning goals of pupils with disabilities and spend more time on it as well [17]. It has been found that special education teachers show more self-efficacy than general education teachers in educating children with disabilities such as autism [18].

## 1.3 The sense of hopelessness

Another factor which has influence on teachers' everyday work is the sense of hopelessness which causes that individuals perceive themselves as incapable of achieving anything valuable [19] and regard their future as pessimistic and impossible to control. When the level of stress begins to overwhelm a person's life, the sense of hopelessness might develop [20]. Being one of the major components of depression [21] or other mental difficulties such as alcoholism [22], hopelessness is a considerable problem nowadays. What is more, people experiencing the sense of hopelessness tend to have higher blood pressure three times more often than average [23].

In educational contexts, the concept of hopelessness is particularly significant as it is claimed that teacher trainees' positive or negative expectations toward their future have a severe impact on their pupils' lives as well as the quality of the whole education system [24]. The issues teacher trainees usually worry about are economic conditions, unemployment and not being able to predict their future. It has been found that attitude towards one's occupation can change the person's future perspectives. According to recent research, teacher trainees who regard their job as valuable and rewarding show beneficial beliefs about the future whereas ones who do not appreciate their profession are more worried about the future [25]. Consequently, individuals who chose their future career owing to their families' suggestions or due to examination results, showed more hopelessness than those who decided to be teachers willingly and due to the internal sense of mission [26].

## 2. Hypothesis

H1: Special education students have higher levels of self-efficacy than general education students.
H2: Special education students have lower level of hopelessness than general education students.

## 3. Methods

*Participants*. A total of 355 students took part in the study, 332 women (93.0%) and 17 men (4.8%), 8 persons (2.2%) did not report gender, with mean age of 22.17 years ($SD$ = 4.63). Students were from the University of Gdańsk, from the Faculty of Social Sciences. 186 individuals (52.4%) studied general education and 169 (47.6%) persons studied special education. Participants were from different years and modes of study.

*Measures*. A self-report, 2-item measure of self-efficacy was used. Within the questionnaire respondents were asked to assume an attitude to 2 various statements: „Usually, I am able to cope with what happens to me" and „I am able to solve most of problems if I put enough effort in it". Sense of hopelessness was measured by self-report, 4-item *Short Hopelessness Scale* (Beck, A. T., Weissman, A., Lester, D., Trexler, L.).

*Procedure*. Data collection used opportunistic sampling. Students were invited to participate anonymously in the study during classes or lectures. More than 90% of all present students agreed to do so. All participants filled in 'paper and pencil' questionnaires. The study took place from December 2016 to January 2017.

*Statistical analyses*. Student $t$ test for independent groups was used to compare two groups of students. All statistical analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0.

## 4. Results

### 4.2 Comparing the values of the students using the *t* test

There was no significant difference in the scores of self-efficacy between general education students ($M$ = 13.75; $SD$ = 2.56) and students of special education ($M$ = 13.81; $SD$ = 2.18), $t$(355) = -0,22, $p$ = .823. There was no significant difference in the scores of hopelessness between general education students ($M$ = 9.26; $SD$ = 4.04) and students of special education ($M$ = 9.15; $SD$ = 3.87), $t$(355) = 0.25, $p$ = .803 (Table 1).

*Table 1: A comparison using the Student t-test group of students of general education and special education students in terms of their personality traits*

| Variable | General education students (n = 186) | | Special education students (n = 169) | | t (355) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Self-Efficacy | 13.75 | 2.56 | 13.81 | 2.18 | -0.22 | .823 |
| Hopelessness | 9.26 | 4.04 | 9.15 | 3.87 | 0.25 | .803 |

## 5. Conclusions

None of the hypotheses was confirmed. Hypothesis 1 was not confirmed. Special education students do not have higher levels of self-efficacy than general education students. Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed. Special education students do not present lower levels of hopelessness than general education students.

## 6. Discussion

The results that indicate no differences in terms of self-efficacy and the sense of hopelessness between general education students of both specializations can be caused by a number of reasons. People can manifest these qualities in the same degree in the general measurement, but this does not exclude differences in the intensity of their expression in other areas of life. Self-efficacy of general education students may relate to feeling confident in developing a career path, promotion or fighting for higher wages. Students of special education can manifest self-efficacy in a greater commitment to work with the student or the better effects of their pedagogical therapy they plan to carry out. Moreover, the sense of hopelessness can be developed by them in the following directions: success as an employee and success as a therapist. We should test this hypothesis in further studies

We may also consider a conscious choice of the young candidates. High school graduates with only a basic knowledge of the conditions of education and work after completing the specialization can see the general and special education as almost equivalent fields of study. Not noticing the differences between them can affect the randomness of their choice caused by poor reflection. The question is whether the hypothesis differentiate students first and last years of special education. It is possible that people who randomly decided to choose this path give up their studies or change specialization to more suited to their personality.

On the other hand, if our results do not come from these possibilities, it indicates a worrying trend in higher education. Students are admitted to the directions that require not only hard skills, but also social skills in a completely uncontrolled way. This indicates special educator to have no predisposition to perform such a difficult and demanding profession, which is to work with children with special educational needs in spite of their knowledge after graduation. Potentially, in a group of graduates we can find units that should not practice this area of education. We may therefore have to make some kind of selection of candidates for the specializations or think about a way of counseling and selection for specific jobs. Person after graduation can perform a number of tasks not directly related to the work with another person as the creation of teaching materials and academic work. Far-reaching idea to solve this problem could be the subspecialty, which will naturally separate persons having adequate social skills and conditions of personality to activities related to work in an institution dealing with children with special needs from people who want work in this field of science, although do not have qualifications mentioned above. Nevertheless, this could be the area to further deliberations.

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