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READINESS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION TO WORK WITH PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results from a questionnaire among 32 university students in special education on bachelor level at Sofia University Saint Kliment Ohridski in Bulgaria, who are in their final year of education, about their readiness for future work with pupils with special educational needs in inclusive settings. The level of the students' theoretical and practical preparation is studied, as well as specific aspects of their acquired knowledge and experience in fields like Braille, sign language, alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) etc.

Keywords*: inclusive education, university students, readiness, special education, work.*

STATE OF THE ART

Nearly 240 million children worldwide live with disabilities (special education needs - SEN) according to statistics of UNICEF (n.d.).

Inclusive education is the most contemporary educational policy, applied all around the world. It started as integrated education for children and students with special educational needs (SEN), meaning admitting these students into regular schools and kindergarten and allowing them to be educated out of the traditional system of special schools and special settings. In time integrated education grew up and

recognized other groups of children as being in need for additional support and attention in the regular school system - students in risk, students with health issues, gifted students, bilingual students, students from immigrant families, students from minority groups etc.

Inclusive education is the most sufficient and effective way to allow all children the best chance to be in school, to learn and to develop the skills they need to thrive. It values the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and provides the possibility diverse groups to be together and share the same learning environment and opportunities and thus to benefit from one another (UNICEF, n.d.).

Inclusive education is defined by many researchers (Radoulov, 2023; Krischler, Powell & Pit-Ten Cate, 2019; Haug, 2016; Florian, 2014; Idol, 2006; Ainscow, 2000; Ainscow, 1994), as well as by many international organizations. The Salamanca statement, signed during the world congress of UNESCO in 1994, was among the key documents on international level, which pathed the way ahead towards inclusion and inclusive education globally. The Statement proclaimed that:

- every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning,
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs,
- education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of these characteristics and needsthose with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a childcentred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs, regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the effkiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO, 1994).

Bulgaria signed the Salamanca Declaration of UNESCO of 1994, which helped the transition to inclusive education. In 2015 in Bulgaria a new educational Law was passed named Law for preschool and school education (Law for Preschool and School Education, 2015/2023), followed by the Ordinance of Inclusive education (Ordinance on Inclusive Education, 2017, Bulgaria).

The educational systems in all countries had to prepare for the new educational requirements put by the inclusive education policy. For the needs of the pupils with SEN kindergarten and schools started offering additional educational support, designed adapted or individual education plans and programs, started hiring special education teachers/resource teachers, psychologists, speech and language therapists and other professionals, taught the regular teachers on how to work and educate students with SEN in the regular classroom.

Universities changed their education plans and designed:

- new classes, new curricula and syllabi in order to provide in-depth knowledge and practical skills in university students who would become special education/resource teachers to work with children and students with SEN in inclusive settings.
- new classes, such as Inclusive education, to be taught to university students who would become regular teachers in preschool and school education.

Sofia University as the oldest and biggest university in Bulgaria, opened in 1888 in the capital city of Sofia, offers within the department of special education of the faculty of educational studies and the arts (FESA), bachelor, master and doctoral programs in special education. A great part of the teaching process in these programs is dedicated to inclusive education of children and students with SEN. The bachelor program takes 4 years of education, the master programs are between 1-2 years and the doctoral program is 3 years long.

Within the bachelor program, there are many classes designed to teach university student in inclusive practices for students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, motor disabilities and multiple disabilities. In addition, Braille, sign language, augmentative and alternative forms of communication (AAC), challenging behavior management in the classroom and other strategies, methods etc. practices are taught to the university students.

Design of the research

The main goal of the current research was to study the readiness of university students in special education on bachelor level to work in inclusive settings with pupils with SEN after their graduation. 32 university students in their final year of education participated in a questionnaire distributed to them via Google form. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions in total, 15 of which were close-ended and 3 were with open answer. We did not include a demographic question in regard to the sex of the university students, because traditionally there are more female students than male, which would reveal their identity. The questionnaire was filled in fully anonymously in September and October 2024.

Analysis of the results

As shown in diagram 1, 90.6% of respondents stated that the theoretical training was completely sufficient. This overwhelming majority indicates that the university's theoretical coursework is highly effective in delivering the necessary knowledge and concepts to students. Most respondents feel confident that they have acquired the essential theoretical background for their field. 9.4% of respondents feel the theoretical preparation was only partially sufficient, highlighting a small but noteworthy portion of students who may feel that some areas of the curriculum could be improved or that additional topics should be

covered. No respondents answered "No" or "I can't decide," which strongly suggests that students do not feel completely dissatisfied or unsure about the quality of their theoretical education.

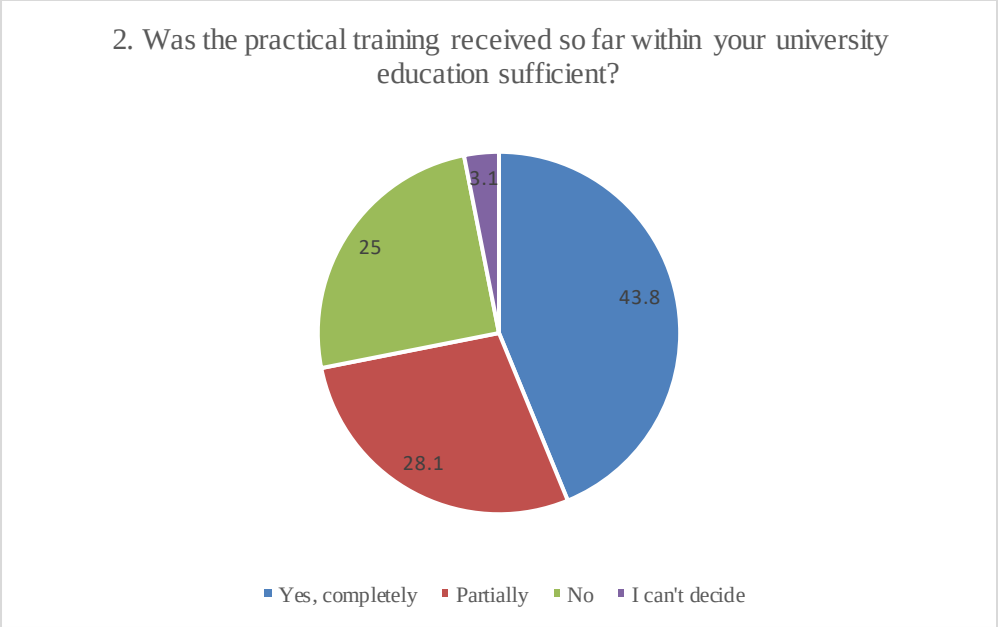
Diagram 1.

Satisfaction in regard with the overall university theoretical training.

Diagram 2 shows that 43.8% of respondents believe that their practical training was completely sufficient, representing a considerable portion who are satisfied with the hands-on experience provided by the university. A significant portion, 28.1%, feel that their practical training was only partially sufficient, indicating that while these students received some valuable experience, they believe that it could be improved or expanded. 25% of respondents feel that the practical training was not sufficient, which suggests a notable gap in the program's ability to provide enough hands-on, real-world learning opportunities. 3.1% are undecided, possibly reflecting uncertainty about the adequacy of their training or lack of sufficient experience to make a judgment.

Diagram 2.

Satisfaction in regard with the overall university practical training.



A majority (53.1%) feel only partially prepared, which suggests that additional focus on training to support hearing-impaired students may be necessary. Only 31.3% feel fully prepared, highlighting a possible training gap in inclusive education practices. 9.4% cannot determine their level of readiness, which also expresses a certain lack of theoretical or practical skills. Fortunately, only 6.3% are categorical in their lack of preparation (Diagram 3).

Diagram 3.

Readiness for work with students with impaired hearing in the context of inclusive education.

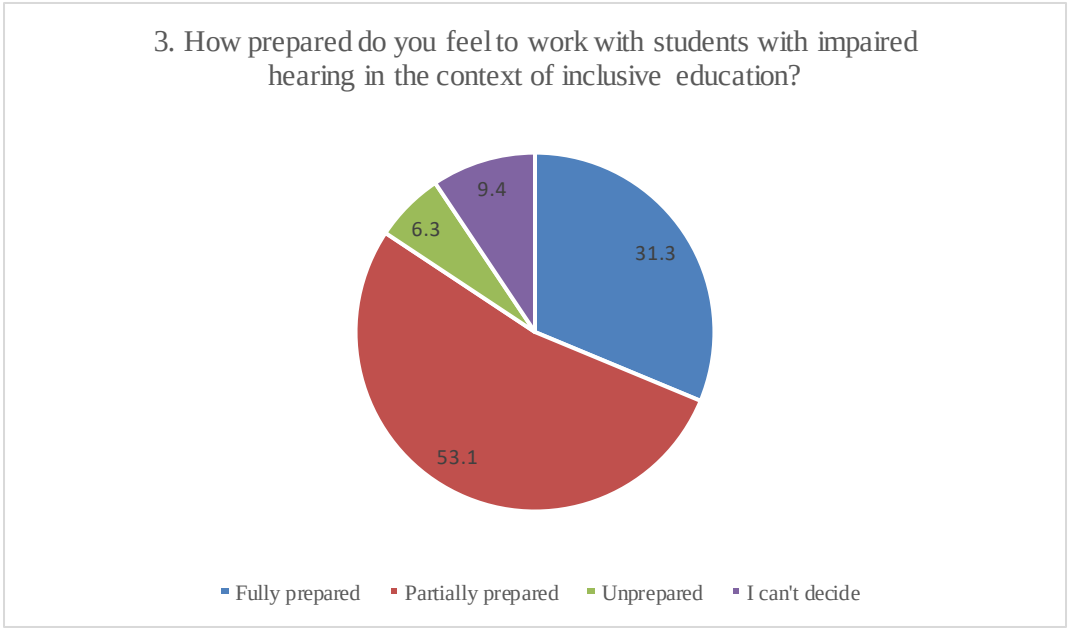
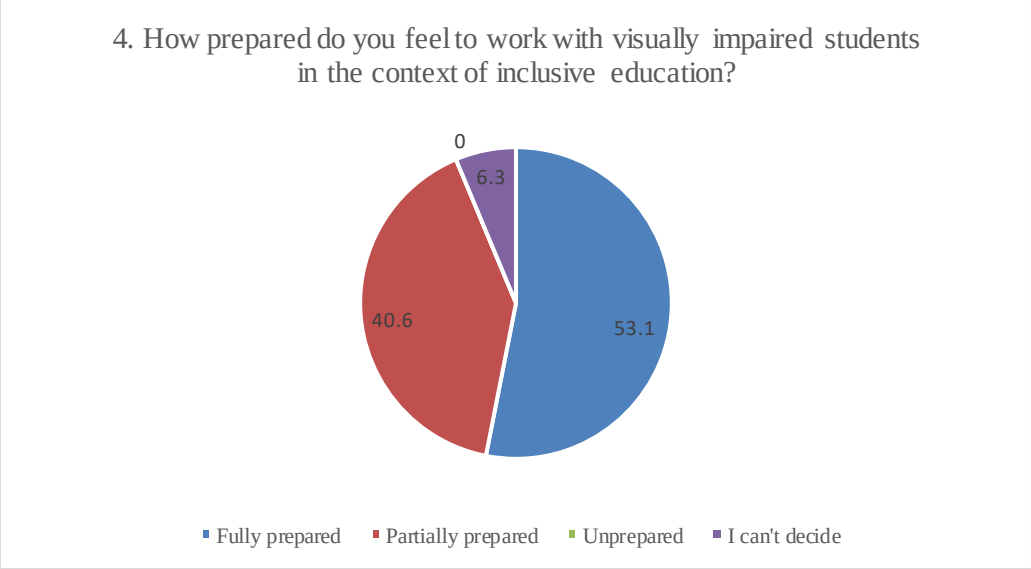


Diagram 4.

***Readiness for work with students with visual impairment in the context of inclusive* education.**

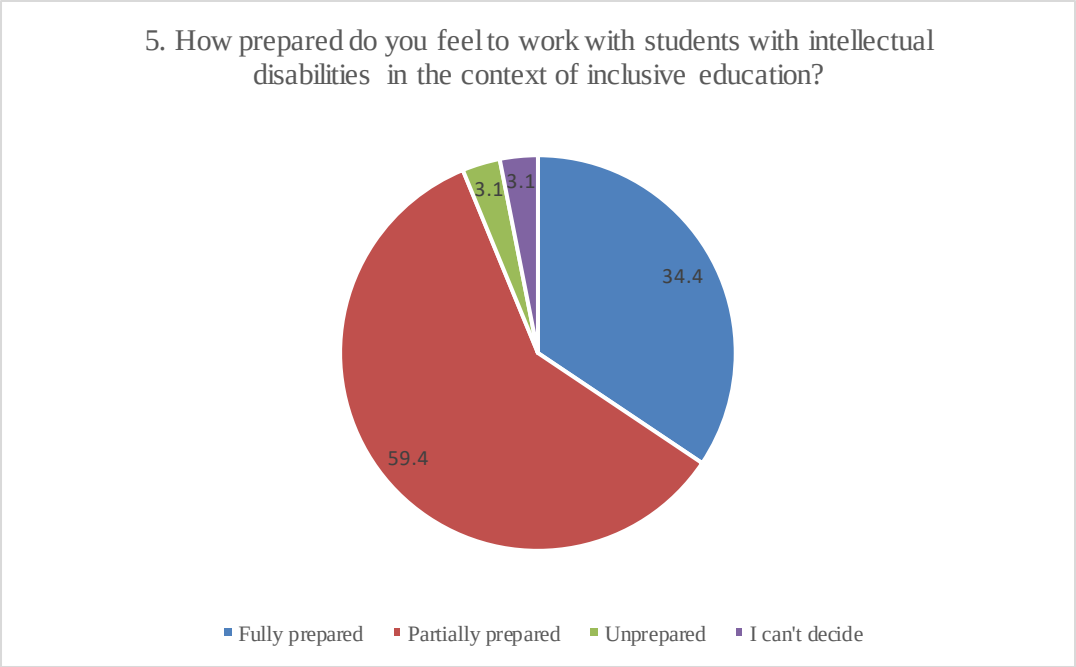


In contrast to working with hearing-impaired students, as seen in diagram 4, more respondents (53.1%) feel fully prepared to support visually impaired students, which suggests that the university has likely provided more effective training in this area. The number of students who are defined as partially prepared is 40.6%, which is also an indication of some lack of confidence in the acquired skills. We note that there are no negative answers, only 6.3% who cannot decide.

Diagram 5 suggests, that most respondents (59.4%) feel only partially prepared, similar to the data for hearing-impaired students. This indicates that while theoretical knowledge may be sufficient, practical skills in dealing with intellectual disabilities might require further reinforcement. But the percentage (34.4%) of students who are confident in their preparation is also not small. only 3.1% cannot decide or feel completely unsure.

Diagram 5.

Readiness for work with students with intellectual disabilities in the context of inclusive education.



Over half (56.3%) of the university students feel only partially prepared, which suggests that the autism-specific content or training might not be as robust. This area might benefit from further resources, practical training, or specialization. But it is still not small and the percentage (37.5%) is convinced of their preparation. again only 3.1% cannot decide or feel completely unsure (Diagram 6).

Diagram 6.

Readiness for work with students with autism spectrum disorder in the context of inclusive education.

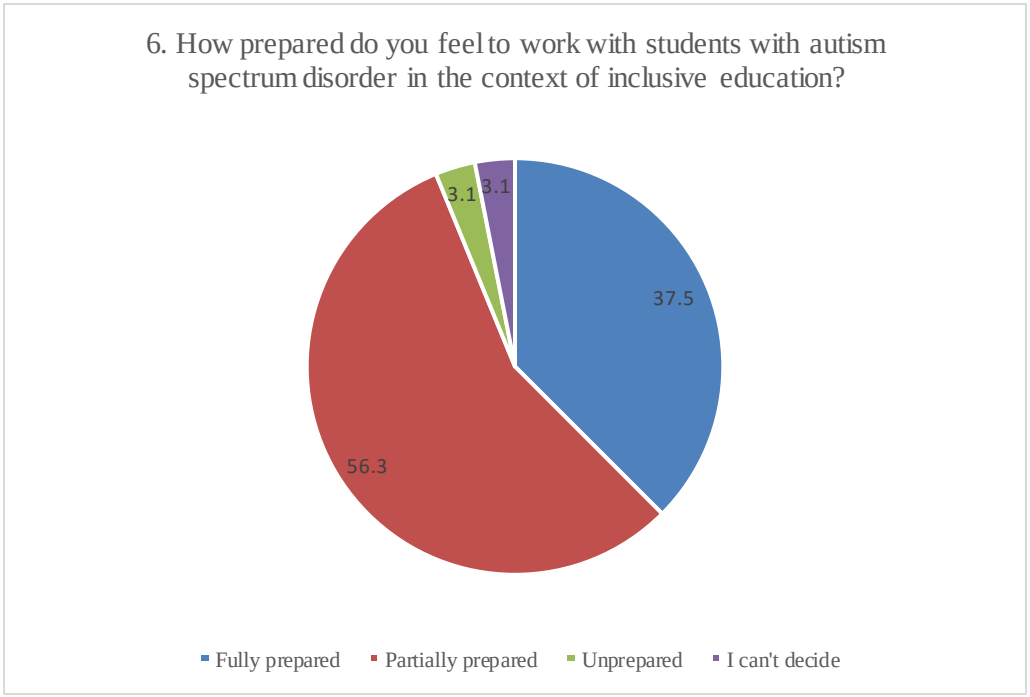
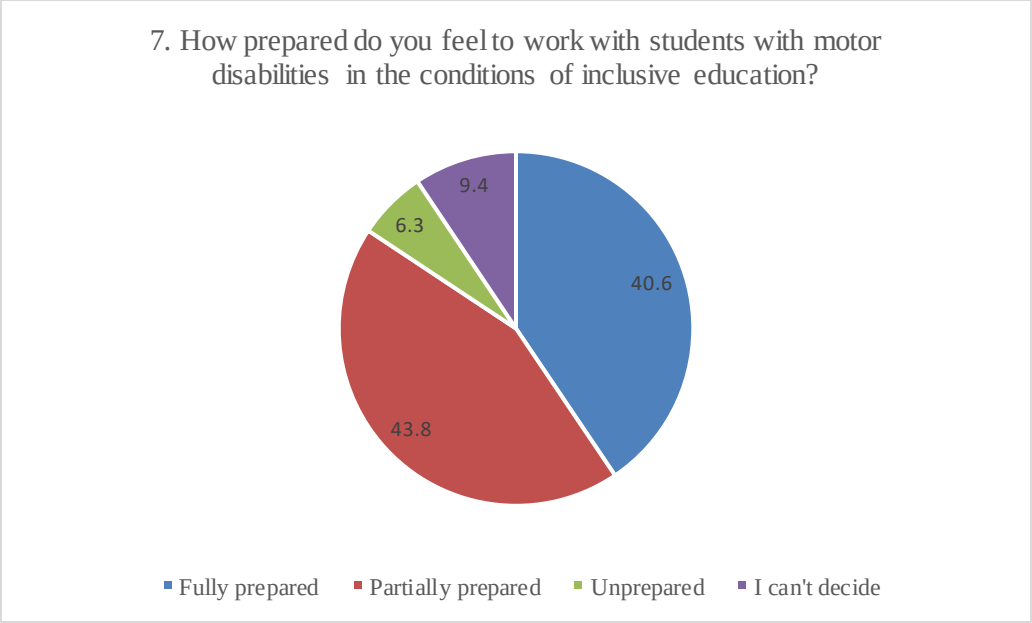


Diagram 7 shows that 43.8% of the respondents feel partially prepared to work with students with motor impairments, which represents the largest group. This suggests that while the respondents have some training or exposure to this area, they may feel they lack sufficient hands-on experience or in-depth knowledge. 40.6% feel fully prepared, which is a positive indication, but not a majority. It shows that a significant portion of the university students feel confident in their ability to handle motor impairments within inclusive education. A smaller percentage, 6.3%, feel unprepared, which indicates that there are still gaps in training that need to be addressed for a small group of students. 9.4% of respondents indicated that they "can not decide." This may imply that these students feel uncertain due to a lack of practical exposure or incomplete knowledge on the subject.

Diagram 7.

Readiness for work with students with motor disabilities in the context of inclusive education.



Probably because of the complexity and specificity of the group of children with multiple disabilities only 31.3% feel fully prepared, which is lower compared to other categories, while 50% feel only partially prepared. The higher rate of unpreparedness (12.5%) compared to other areas signals a possible fear and uncertainty when working with this category. These results can also be an indicator of the level of awareness and attitudes towards children with multiple disabilities (Diagram 8).

Diagram 8.

Readiness for work with students with multiple disabilities in the context of inclusive education.

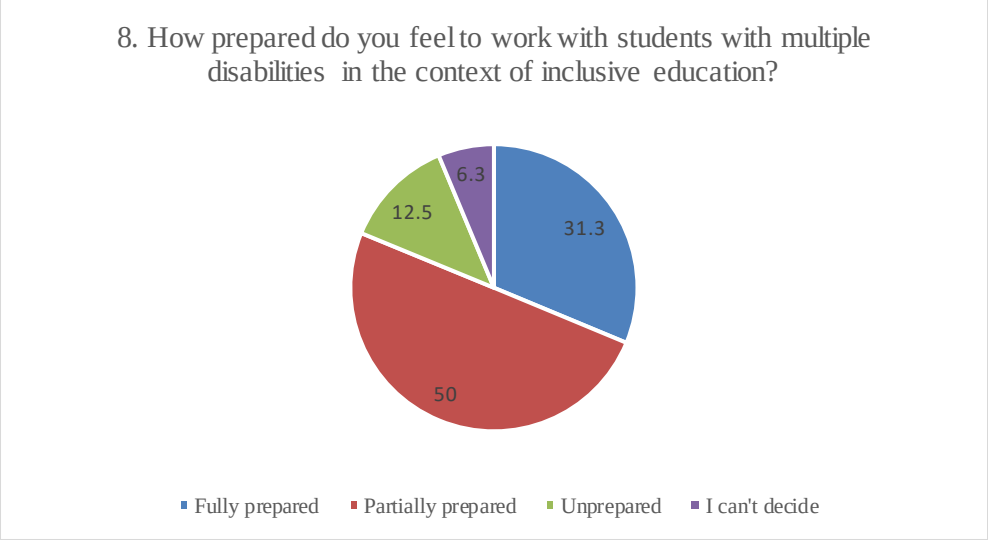
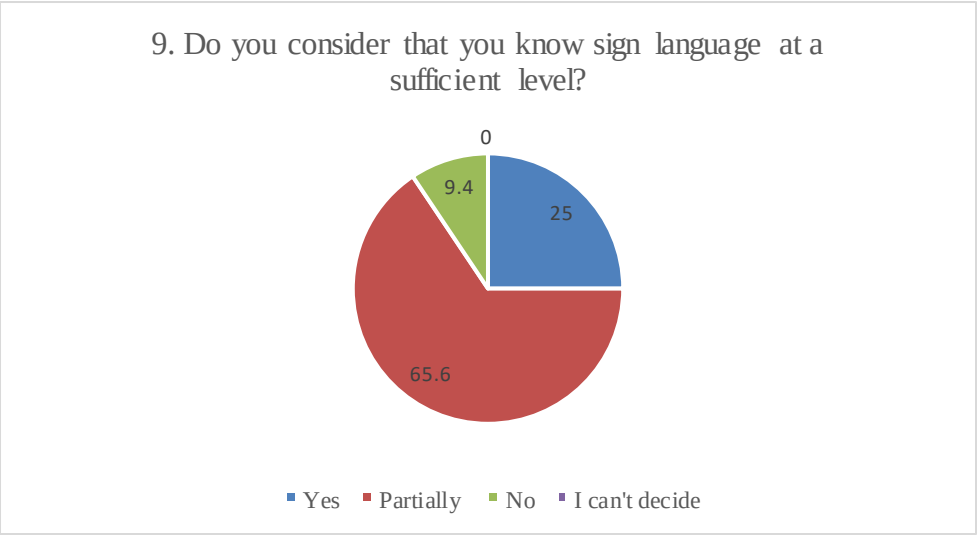


Diagram 9 suggests that the majority of respondents (65.6%) feel that they only partially know sign language, indicating a significant gap in this area. Since only 25% feel confident, this suggests a need for more in-depth sign language instruction as part of the curriculum. Also, 9.4% note that they do not master it at a sufficient level. This confirms the intelligence of sign language and the need for a longer period of acquisition and practice.

Diagram 9.

Level of knowledge in sign language.



The majority of respondents (59.4%) feel confident in their Braille knowledge. However, 28.1% feel partially confident, and 6.3% feel they lack sufficient knowledge. This indicates that while Braille instruction is relatively effective, some students still need further practice or support. The encouraging

results regarding Braille proficiency confirm the claims that Braille is not difficult to learn, but more difficult to use. These skills also require longer practice.

Diagram 10.
Level of knowledge in braille

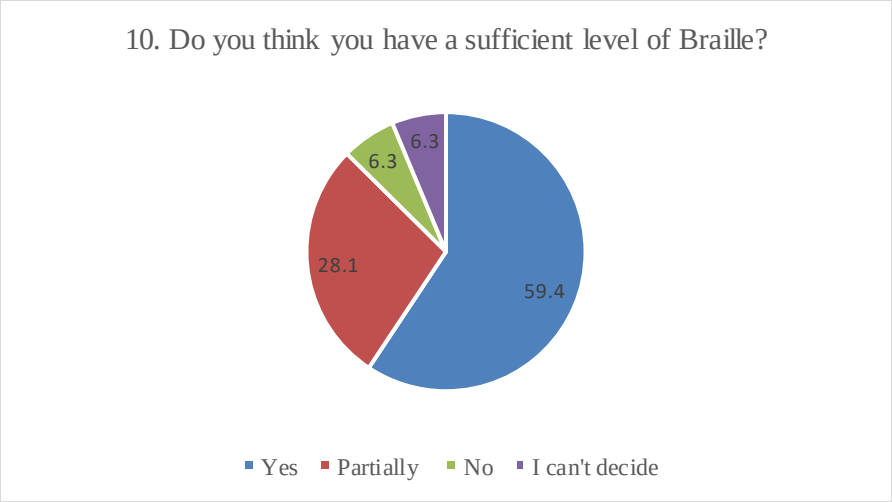
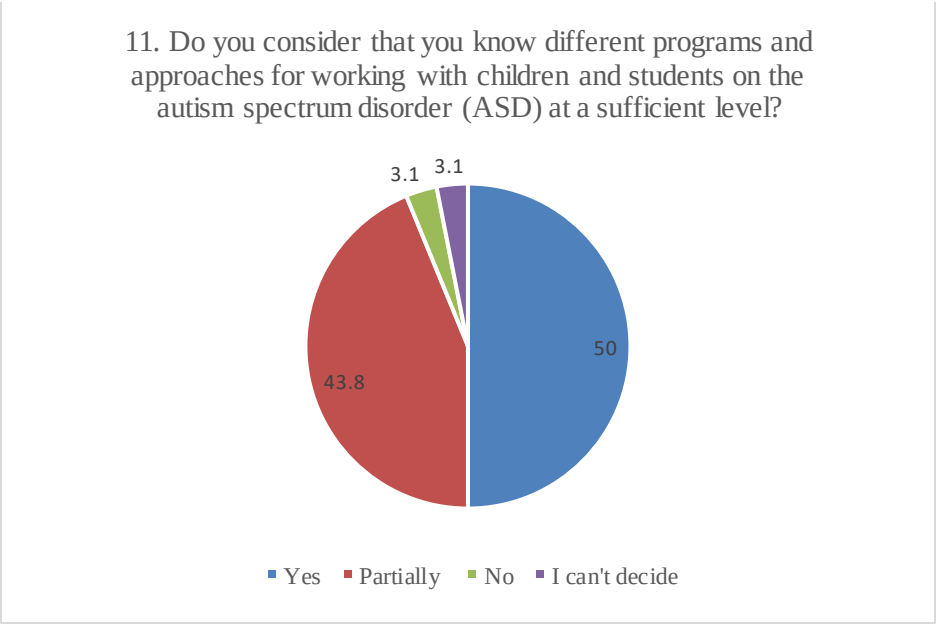


Diagram 11 shows that half of the respondents (50%) feel confident in their knowledge of autism-related programs and approaches, but a large proportion (43.8%) feel only partially prepared. There seems to be a need for enhanced training on specialized interventions for autism spectrum students. Only 3.1% are extremely unsure, which shows. Given the heterogeneity of this group, we would like to note the not small percentage of partially or fully prepared students.

Diagram 11.

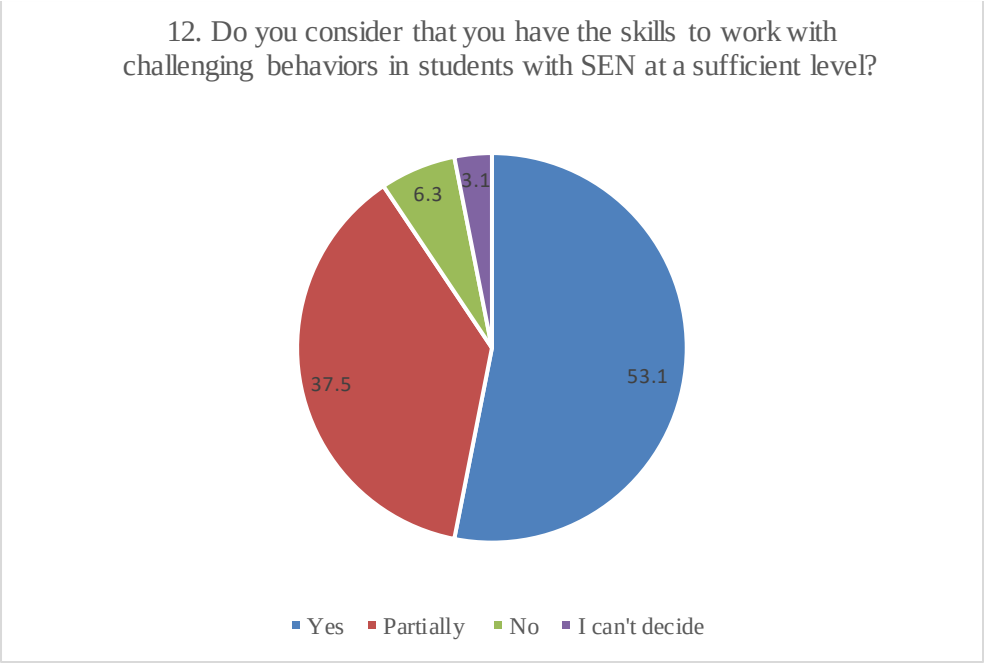
Level of knowledge in programs and approaches for students with ASD.



As shown on diagram 12, a little over half of the respondents (53.1%) believe they have sufficient skills to manage problematic behaviors in students with special educational needs (SEN), while 37.5% feel they need more support. Only 6.3% are defined as unprepared. The results show that there is no universal approach and the need to build practical skills, an individual approach and adaptability are part of working with children with problem behavior.

Diagram 12.

Level of knowledge about challenging behaviors in students with SEN.



Most respondents (62.5%) feel confident in their ability to use alternative and augmentative communication when working with SEN students. However, there is still a significant portion (25%) who feel only partially prepared. More focus on alternative communication strategies could further enhance student confidence. Probably some of the students feel insecurity because of the massive and rapid entry of new technologies into many areas of our lives (Diagram 13).

Diagram 13.
Level of knowledge in AAC.

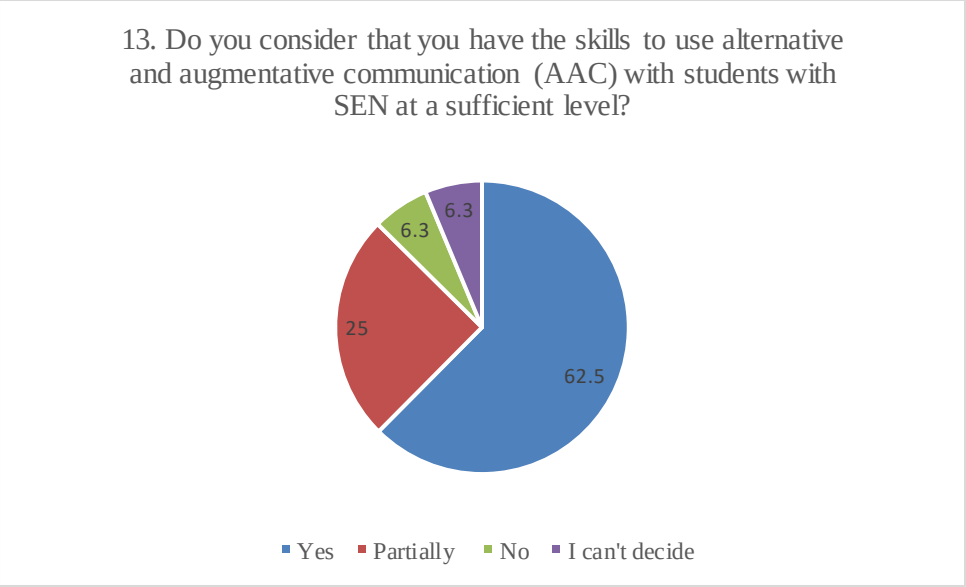
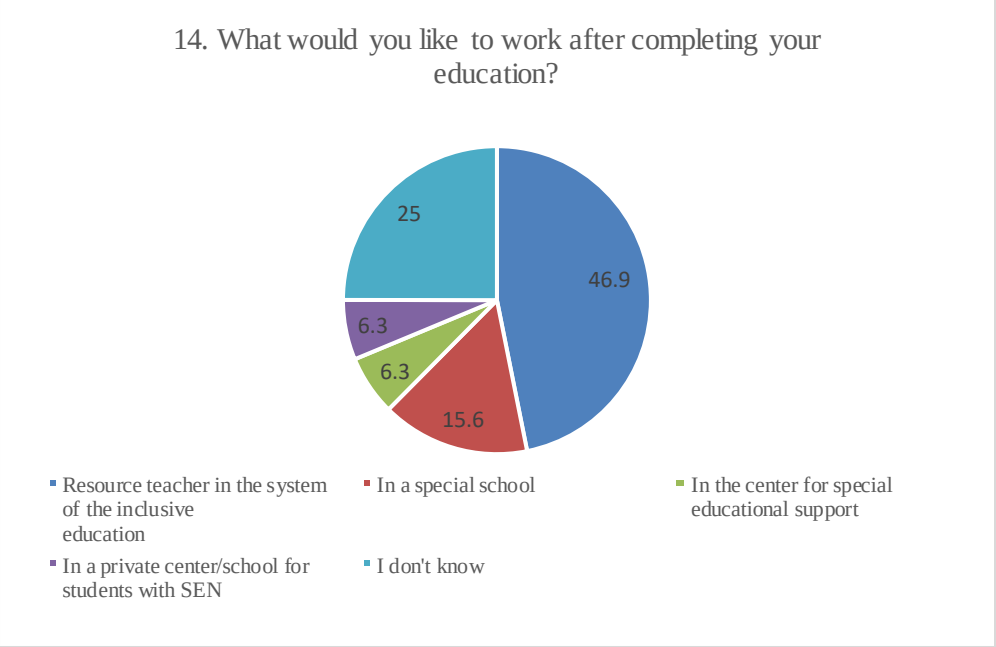


Diagram 14 presents that almost half (46.9%) of the respondents aspire to become resource teachers in inclusive education, which aligns with their training. The percentage of university students who would like to be teachers in a special school is also not small (15.6%). However, 25% are uncertain about their future career path, indicating the need for more career guidance and exposure to diverse professional roles in the field.

Diagram 14.

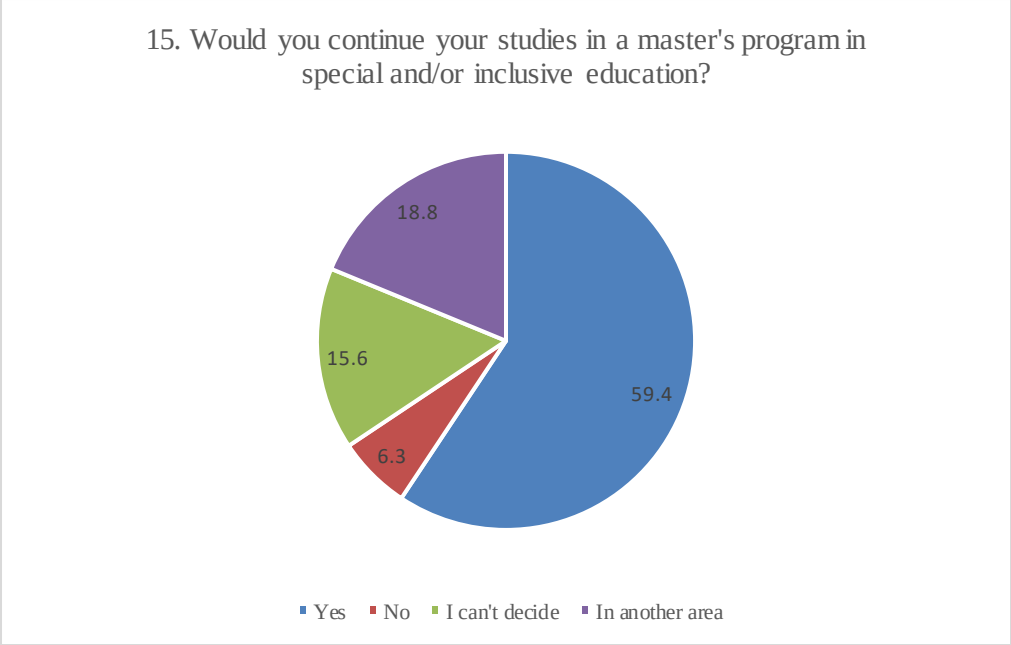
Preferred job after graduation.



A majority of respondents (59.4%) are interested in continuing their studies in special education. However, the % of students who are undecided or considering another area (15.6% and 18.8%, respectively) suggests that some students might feel unsure about their future or desire a different academic path. On the positive side, a large number of Bachelor of Special Education graduates enrich their academic training in other areas of education to expand their opportunities for realization and competence (Diagram 15).

Diagram 15.

Interest in master programs in the field of special and inclusive education.



In relation to question 16 on motivation for continuing their university education in master programs, we will summarize the answers received. Most of the university students are driven by the desire to gain more in-depth knowledge and practical skills for working with children with special educational needs, which leads to the conclusion that a large part of these students have the intention to work professionally in this field.

Questions 17 and 18 are related to recommendations regarding the improvement of the theoretical and practical training during the university education. As can be assumed from the data summarized above, no significant recommendations stand out regarding the theoretical preparation, apart from offering modern literature, more resources and the opportunity to carry out a discussion on various topics related to the training.

Most of the specific recommendations refer to practical training and are related to the possibility of dedicating more time for practice in a real learning environment (practice-teaching) and for allowing more

opportunities to act out real situations to discuss possible adequate solutions. There are specific recommendations for more visits to educational institutions and early inclusion in practical activities.

We can summarize our conclusions in the following main domains:

1. Theoretical Training Satisfaction

- **High Satisfaction**: The overwhelming majority (90.6%) of respondents feel that the theoretical training they received during their university education on bachelor level was completely sufficient. This indicates that the curriculum is effective in providing the necessary foundations of knowledge for the university students.
- **Minor Improvement Needed**: The small percentage (9.4%) of university students who felt only partially satisfied suggested that there may be specific areas of the theoretical curriculum that require enhancement or additional coverage.

2. Practical Training Gaps

- **Mixed Satisfaction**: The responses regarding practical training reveal a more varied perspective. While 43.8% of students feel that their practical training is completely sufficient, a significant 25% feel it is not sufficient, and 28.1% feel it is only partially sufficient. This indicates a substantial portion of students may not feel adequately prepared for practical applications in their fields.
- **Need for Improvement**: The data suggests a critical need to enhance the practical training component of the curriculum. Increasing opportunities for hands-on experience, internships, and real-world applications could better prepare students for their future careers.

3. Readiness for Inclusive Education

- **General Readiness**: Many students express varying levels of readiness to work with students with different educational needs. For example, while a majority feel prepared to work with visually impaired students (53.1%), others, such as those working with students with motor impairments, show lower confidence levels (40.6% fully prepared).
- **Focus Areas for Training**: The percentages indicate that while some students feel adequately trained, significant portions feel only partially prepared, particularly in areas related to autism spectrum disorders and work with students with intellectual disabilities.

4. Interest in Further Education

- **Pursuit of Advanced Studies**: A notable percentage (59.4%) of university students express interest in continuing their studies in a master's program related to special and inclusive education. However, a substantial portion (25%) remain uncertain about their future paths, suggesting a need for more career guidance and support from the university.

5. Overall Implications for Curriculum Development

- **Curriculum Evaluation Needed**: The findings suggest that while the theoretical education is strong, the practical training aspect needs further attention. It is necessary to integrate more practical experiences in the educational process.
- **Continuous Improvement**: Regular assessments of both theoretical and practical components of the curriculum, alongside student feedback, will help ensure that educational offerings remain relevant and effective in preparing the university students for their future careers in inclusive education.

The data collected through our questionnaire among 32 university students in special education on bachelor level provides a picture of university students' satisfaction and readiness in theoretical versus practical training, highlighting areas for improvement, particularly in practical applications and specialized training for working with students with special education needs. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for enhancing the educational experience and career readiness of the graduates in special education.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the survey of 32 university students in special education reveal a generally positive perception of the theoretical component of their academic training, with over 90% expressing full satisfaction. However, significant gaps remain in practical preparation, with more than half of the respondents indicating partial or insufficient readiness. Notably, student confidence varies when it comes to inclusive education, especially in addressing complex needs such as autism and intellectual disabilities. While there is strong interest in pursuing further education in the field, the data also highlight a need for enhanced practical components, targeted training in inclusion, and better career support. These insights underline the importance of continuous curriculum evaluation and development to ensure both theoretical robustness and practical competence in preparing future inclusive education professionals.

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