

## **Pedagogical principles of professional special needs teacher education**

### **Premises of the professional special needs teacher education**

A key objective of the education policy in Finland is providing equal education opportunities for everyone. The education policy highlights equality, parity and well-being in education and society. Social and educational equality requires that everyone has the opportunity to participate in education based on their personal ability to learn and function. To achieve this objective, educational models and procedures are being developed to be more inclusive and more suitable for all students. The same objective also involves the aim for accessible and barrier-free education at all levels. Professional special needs teachers have a key role to play in this development. The professional special needs teacher education is built on national and international policies and guidelines supporting equality, parity and well-being. One of the goals of professional special needs teacher education is supporting the teacher students and their organisations in analysing, developing and promoting a thinking and operating culture of equality, accessibility and inclusion.

The work of a professional special needs teacher is specialist work that requires extensive knowledge of special and conventional pedagogy: the competence to solve complex issues and manage various matters. Successful work as a professional special needs teacher requires the preparedness for continuous learning. In the work of a professional special needs teacher, a role in which the teacher supports and offers consultation to groups and communities – while also inspiring them – is increasingly common, in addition to focusing on the individual. The job description of a professional special needs teacher has expanded from instructing individuals and groups to offering multidisciplinary and diverse network expertise to work communities and their stakeholders. A professional special needs teacher is the expert on network operations.

Ethically sustainable principles form the value base of a professional special needs teacher: respecting diversity and supporting the agency and learning of all students. For a professional special needs teacher to strengthen inclusion, accessibility and equality, they need an accepting attitude, sufficient theoretical and research-based knowledge and broad competence in the profession of a teacher. In their work, professional special needs teachers face phenomena where they need to promote sustainability through their example and opinions.

The education is centred on the development of the competence identity of the student – from a teacher to a professional special needs teacher. The development of the identity requires inquisitive learning, a strong theory base and experiences of professional special needs teaching. The student may be partially unfamiliar with the community of professional special needs teaching, which is why the education provides a communal experience of the field. The formation of a competence identity is a learning path that orients the student towards being a special needs teacher and its many aspects through inquisitive learning.

### **Integrative conception of knowledge**

Competence can be approached through an integrative conception of knowledge. A special needs teacher must be able to apply theory into practice and also examine practical experiences in the light of theory. Theoretical knowledge is turned into a form where it can be used in practice to solve complex and unexpected issues with a focus on the future. By conceptualising knowledge acquired through practical experiences, the understanding of the phenomena related to learning, and the relationships between them, is expanded and deepened. However, the application of theoretical information into practice is not sufficient for an expert's competence. Knowledge of self-regulation and the regulation of action is developed when the person thinks about, studies and evaluates their own knowledge, actions and experiences in various operating environments. The objective of the professional special needs teacher education is to ensure the knowledge, skills and competence of the students for them to work as professional special needs teachers.

### **The foundation of the practical implementation of studies**

The implementation of professional special needs teacher education emphasises broad topics, phenomena and issues arising out of the practical work. These have been compiled into study modules and units in the curriculum. The implementation of the professional special needs teacher studies focuses on action, the shared formation of information and competencies, and seeking different alternative perspectives. Professional special needs teacher education emphasises inclusive pedagogy, the student's own activity, inquisitive learning, shared production and assessment of information, and development of new practices.

The practical implementation of the studies is based on the following five perspectives:

**Individuality** allows for attachment to the studies and studying. Individuality requires that the student is consciously committed to the learning process, works actively by producing new information to be learned, and feels they are personally responsible for the results of learning. The opportunity to impact your own actions and environment, such as work that requires consideration and planning and the freedom to design your own study paths, helps students build the special needs teacher education into a meaningful entity for themselves.

**Guidance** is the basis for interaction and goal-setting. Teaching and guidance are shared activities that support and advance the learning, growth, working and problem-solving processes of students in ways that strengthen their agency. Good teaching and guidance are built through respectful, constructive and dialogic interaction. In the implementation of guidance, goal-oriented actions, support for reflection, emotional presence and authentic dialogue are key. The goal is to support the creation of the competence and personality growth required by both the studies and the work.

**Authenticity** is related to the realism of the activities. Authenticity is not achieved only through the exercises or the environment being as realistic as possible. Instead, it is required that the actions and information processing required of the student are authentic. In short, authenticity is implemented through shared interaction between the student, the exercises and the environment. The special needs teacher education offers opportunities of using and practising the methods and procedures required in authentic working contexts of special needs teachers.

**Cooperation** directs the practical activities. Cooperation means that students work and build new information in cooperation with each other and various parties outside the educational institutions, making use of each other's knowledge, skills and competence. This emphasises both individual and shared responsibility, and it aims to achieve the best learning results possible for both individuals and groups. In the special needs teacher studies, cooperation can be seen in shared planning, peer assessment, peer guidance, learning partnerships and a project-based approach of the student community

and team.

**Plasticity** facilitates various solutions.

Plasticity means the ability to adapt the actions and plans as required by new, changing and uncertain situations. It involves the flexibility of thinking, action, exercises, plans and structures. In the implementation plan of the special needs teacher education, this can be seen in the individual study paths: personalised solutions for acquiring and demonstrating competence.

## **Assessment**

The competence-based studies are based on the recognition of prior learning, the acquisition of required competence and the assessment of competence. The assessment is based on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the education programme. Assessment supports learning and is intended to direct the student's activity towards the future – the work of a professional special needs teacher. Assessment that emphasises the student's own activity and reciprocity involves self-assessment and peer assessment as well as assessment related to working life and feedback that reflects on the progress of the studies and the achievement of objectives.

The learning outcomes have been developed in extensive cooperation with networks that involve the staff of vocational schools and universities of applied sciences, alumni of TAMK's professional teacher studies, students and other stakeholders. In addition to this, the learning outcomes show the national quality guidelines for professional special needs teacher education. The outcomes also pay attention to the regulations that direct education.

In special needs teacher education, the student is given responsibility for assessing and planning their own learning and competence. Competence is demonstrated and assessed in ways agreed on in advance, with the uniqueness of the situation taken into consideration. In the assessment of competence, the competence acquired by the student is compared to the learning outcomes. When the competence described in the outcomes has been demonstrated in full, the competence will be recognised and assessed as approved. According to the principles of competence-based studies, the education programme does not specify the manners of acquiring the required competence. There may be several ways of acquiring competence, and they may vary among students.

Competence-based learning is authentic and focuses on working life. It also strengthens the identity of a special needs teacher student as a constant learner, a developer of their own work and a socially responsible operator. The teaching, guidance and digital environments of the professional teacher studies provide a valuable learning environment.

The working and operating environments of the special needs teacher students also act as key learning and assessing environments. During the studies, the students work in teams: they learn together and reflect on their own ideas. According to the principle of communality, working as a team member supports studies while showcasing the significance of peer guidance.