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Men in special education: A self-experiential professional development seminar supporting professional identity

Abstract: This study aimed to describe and evaluate a newly developed self-experiential seminar designed for students of special education at higher education institutions. The seminar was developed in response to the longstanding underrepresentation of men in special education programmes at Charles University and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University. It combined field-based learning, mentoring and guided reflection on professional identity, with particular emphasis on gender-sensitive approaches and enhancing the appeal of the field for male students. A mixed-methods design was employed, comprising a questionnaire (N = 115) and focus groups with male participants (N = 11). The results indicated that perceived teaching professionalism, pedagogical responsiveness and course attractiveness were positively associated with students' confidence in their career choices. Male students reported heightened visibility and pressure linked to their minority status, while valuing support from lecturers and peers. The findings suggest that the methods employed in the seminar strengthen professional identity, motivation and self-efficacy while providing a transferable model that integrates theory with practice and supports diversity in educational professions.

Keywords: gender stereotypes; career choice; experiential seminar; mixed-methods design

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Introduction

The profession of special education has a longstanding tradition in the Czech Republic. University-level training was established in 1946 at the Faculty of Education of Charles University and has been in continuous operation since then, currently offered at 11 higher education institutions (Renotíárová and Ludíková 2004; Stárek 2023). The field maintains high prestige and sustained applicant interest. However, a marked gender imbalance persists; men constitute only 8.7% of practitioners, reflecting historically embedded gendered divisions of labour (Doležalová 2009). This disparity gains significance against the backdrop of the increasing complexity of pupils' educational needs, particularly among children experiencing social disadvantages or mental health difficulties, for whom male role models may support their stability and personal development (Bínová and Havelka 2021; Mühlpachr 2004). Special education encompasses pedagogical, diagnostic, therapeutic and counselling functions, emphasising flexibility, innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration (Dorozhovets et al. 2021). To increase its appeal to men, the literature recommends introducing practically oriented and innovative courses that allow individualised study pathways and greater engagement of underrepresented groups. At the same time, it is essential to strengthen pedagogical and psychosocial approaches that foster professional identities and challenge gender stereotypes (Wörner et al. 2022).

Against this background, the present study evaluates a newly developed self-experiential seminar designed for students at faculties of education aimed at integrating theoretical knowledge with practice, strengthening professional identities and addressing gender imbalances in special education. The seminar combined participatory and reflective methods, field-based learning and gender-sensitive pedagogy. This study examines how this seminar format influences students' satisfaction, motivation, career orientation and perceptions of gender neutrality within the field. Particular attention is paid to gender differences in students' evaluations of course attractiveness, relevance and professional impact. This article presents the theoretical framework underpinning the development of the self-experiential seminar with empirical findings obtained from its evaluation.

Professional competencies and the development of special educators

Contemporary higher education is characterised by increasing student diversity in terms of age, sociocultural background, experience and motivation, largely because of massification processes (Gupta et al. 2023; Seemiller and Grace 2016). These developments place greater demands on innovation in curriculum design and support for the development of students' professional identities. Relational pedagogy, grounded in principles of mutual respect, trust and participation, enables teaching to become a shared space for personal and professional growth (Galbally and Christodoulidi 2023; Taslibeyaz 2024). This approach is particularly valuable in highly feminised fields, such as special education, where male students may experience isolation or stereotypical expectations (Schutz and Zembylas 2016). Special education is a profession marked by considerable social responsibility. It requires not only specialist competence but also emotional and psychological resilience (Zhang 2021). Working with individuals facing health-related and socioemotional difficulties demands empathy, patience and the capacity to individualise pedagogical and therapeutic strategies (Fernandes et al. 2021). Special educators also face substantial administrative workloads and the need for continuous professional development, including staying abreast of new methodological and inclusive practices (Bínová and Havelka 2021).

In a feminised professional field, male educators and students play indispensable roles. Their presence contributes to professional diversity, provides pupils and students with male role models and helps challenge the perception of caring professions as a 'female domain' (Cameron and Billington 2024). Research further indicates that male educators may act as protective factors for boys with experiences of trauma and help reduce gender bias in behavioural assessments (ibid.). Thus, their participation broadens the spectrum of available role models and supports a more balanced and sensitive educational environment. These insights inform our research project, which emphasises the creation of a safe, supportive and participatory academic environment. Its aim is to enable male students to explore the professional realities of special education without prejudice, to build meaningful relationships with inspiring practitioners and to reflect on the deeper purpose of their future profession. Integrating relational pedagogy, participatory methods and gender-sensitive strategies represents a crucial step towards increasing male engagement in the field, strengthening the professional identity of all students and cultivating an inclusive, ethically grounded academic culture (Galbally and Christodoulidi 2023).

Theoretical Framework and Pedagogical Principles of the Experiential Seminar

Special education in the Czech Republic faces a significant challenge regarding gender imbalances. Men constitute only a small proportion of the student population, which can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalisation

(Doležalová 2009). This situation affects not only equal opportunities but also the quality of the educational environment, which loses its potential for diversity. Relational pedagogy offers an appropriate framework for enhancing inclusion and supporting male students, emphasising the quality of interpersonal relationships, participation and personal development (Felten and Lambert 2020). Felten and Lambert (ibid.) identified four core principles of a *relationship-rich education*: acceptance and care, inspiration for learning, building a network of significant relationships and cultivating purpose and meaning in education. *Acceptance and care* involve creating a respectful and supportive environment that helps students in gender-minority positions overcome stereotypes and uncertainty. *Inspiration for learning* entails pedagogical strategies that foster active engagement and the formation of professional identity, particularly among men who may experience tension between traditional gender roles and the caring nature of the profession. *Building a network of relationships* highlights collaboration and partnership between students and mentors, thereby enhancing inclusion and professional self-confidence (Knissarina 2024). *Purpose and meaning in education* enable reflection on personal and professional goals, promoting deeper engagement and intrinsic motivation (Zhang 2021; Xu 2023).

The aim of Table 1 is to provide an overview of the key areas of intervention implemented within the experiential seminar and their intended benefits for students. The table summarises the main pedagogical approaches, including elective seminars, dialogic teaching through case studies, mentoring, peer learning, inclusive language practices and reflection on the purpose of education. Each intervention is described in terms of its format and its anticipated impact on students' development, such as enhancing professional identity, fostering collaboration, promoting critical thinking and supporting inclusion and motivation within special education.

Area of intervention	Description	Benefits for students
Elective seminars	Group sessions on experience sharing, attitudes and professional identity reflections.	Strengthens sense of belonging, provides a safe space to express concerns and supports growth through mutual support.
Dialogic teaching (case studies)	Collaborative work on real-life cases, emphasising diverse perspectives and experiences.	Promotes collaboration, empathy and critical thinking.
Mentoring and role models	Opportunities to engage with practitioners, including male role models (e.g. alumni and professionals).	Provides inspiration and professional anchoring, especially for students who may feel marginalised.
Peer learning and community-based teaching	Students act as co-creators of the learning environment, e.g. leading discussions, facilitating activities or participating in assessments.	Enhances autonomy, competence and inclusion within the academic community.
Inclusive language practices	Incorporating gender-sensitive language and reflecting diversity in teaching and communication (e.g. balanced forms of address).	Reduces feelings of exclusion, normalises diversity and fosters a safe learning environment.
Reflection on the purpose of education	Activities encouraging reflection on study motivation, expectations and personal fulfilment in the professional role.	Supports professional identity, intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment to the field.

Table 1: Principles for creating a relational climate to support gender balance in special education

The effective implementation of principles of participatory and self-experiential education, including elective seminars, dialogic teaching, mentoring, peer learning, inclusive language practices and reflection on the purpose of education, requires the active involvement of students in the learning process. Such engagement fosters a sense of responsibility and co-ownership of learning (Kazlauskienė 2021). Within self-experiential seminars, these principles have been successfully applied through student focus groups, curriculum reviews, peer learning and mentoring, which support the development of collaborative skills, enable reflection on individual needs and support male students in minority positions (Seery et al. 2021). The integration of relational pedagogy with participatory strategies contributes not only to increasing male representation in the field but also to strengthening the professional identity of all students and fostering an inclusive, diversity-sensitive academic environment (Gehreke 2024; Geurts et al. 2023; Moriña 2020).

Building on these pedagogical principles, the innovative seminar *Current Trends in Special Education* (2025) was implemented as part of a project funded by the European Social Fund – Operational Programme Employment Plus (Special Educator: Inspiring Career Choice, reg. no. CZ.03.01.02/00/22_020/0000873). The project addressed the low representation of men in special education programmes at the faculties of education of Charles University and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí and Labem (CU and UJEP), documented the experiences of students and graduates and reflected on gender-related stereotypes within the field.

The seminar was conducted with academics from CU and UJEP and practising professionals, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experience across special primary schools, hospital schools, day-care centres and non-governmental organisations. Participants analysed the professional roles of special educators, with particular attention to male representation, and proposed measures to enhance the prestige and attractiveness of the profession. They actively engaged with professionals, mapped organisational cultures and developed materials and strategies to strengthen the professional identity of male educators. The seminar was grounded in principles of participatory teaching, reflective practice and gender-sensitive pedagogy. Male participants were encouraged to openly reflect on their experiences in a traditionally feminised environment, with gender diversity framed as a professional asset. The practical components of the seminar, discussions, group work and simulated scenarios fostered critical thinking, communication skills and a conscious approach to professional identity.

The seminar further combined developmental field visits with situational learning, whereby students observed authentic classroom teaching, engaged in discussions with professionals and proposed solutions to specific scenarios. This approach is grounded in the principles of experiential learning, emphasising the construction of knowledge through personal experience, reflective analysis and subsequent application (Morris 2019; Tomkins et al. 2016). Feedback and self-assessment were integral to the seminar, enhancing the students' professional autonomy and their capacity to reflect critically on their professional development.

The theoretical foundation of the project was relational pedagogy, which prioritises respect, trust and deep student engagement in the learning process. Such an approach is particularly valuable in highly feminised fields, where minority groups, especially men, may experience isolation or encounter stereotypical expectations (Felten and Lambert 2020; Masry-Herzallah 2024). By situating students in real-life professional contexts and supporting reflective practices, the seminar not only facilitated the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills, but also contributed to the development of professional identities, resilience and confidence among all participants, with targeted attention to the experiences of male students.

Methodology

A mixed-methods design was employed for this study, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate a newly developed self-experiential seminar for students in the special education degree programme at the faculties of education. The quantitative component comprised a structured questionnaire survey. The qualitative component was conducted through semi-structured interviews within focus groups aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of male students' experiences and identifying the specific needs and challenges associated with their minority positions in a feminised field.

Quantitative part of the study

The questionnaire integrated closed-ended Likert-scale items with open-ended questions, providing insight into participants' subjective experiences, their evaluations of teaching quality, content relevance and the seminar's impact on motivation and career orientation, with particular attention to gender neutrality and inclusion. It was structured into identification and evaluation sections, enabling the collection of contextual information and the assessment of specific aspects of the seminar. Open-ended questions complemented the quantitative data by offering qualitative perspectives and facilitating the identification of areas for improvement in curriculum design and pedagogical practice.

The online questionnaire was standardised using the LimeSurvey platform and consulted with an expert group composed of academic staff and an expert from the Czech Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology. The reliability of the data was ensured through a review by a team of sociology experts (Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociology), while the validity of the data was verified through a pilot study involving five students enrolled in a special education degree programme. The empirical phase, that is data collection, was scheduled for May and June 2025 (the end of the summer academic semester). The questionnaires were anonymous, and the data were processed anonymously. Likewise, subsequent focus groups with male students were anonymised. These focus groups served to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in studying special education.

At the beginning of the semester, all male students enrolled in the programme were invited to participate in the study, and those who consented were included. Similarly, female students were invited via their study circles and provided their consent to participate.

The questionnaire's items were informed by the pedagogical and psychological literature on teaching evaluations, students' motivation and the integration of theory and practice (Felten and Lambert 2020), while reflecting principles of gender-sensitive pedagogy (Morris 2019; Seery et al. 2021). The structure was reviewed with experts from the faculties of education at Charles University (CU) and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University (UJEP) and pilot tested with a small group of students to ensure clarity and appropriate length. The introductory section captured informants' demographic and study-related characteristics (A1 – gender, A2 – faculty and A3 – study programme), enabling the segmentation of results and the interpretation of group differences.

The second section of the questionnaire evaluated the quality and perceived benefits of the seminar from the students' perspective, drawing on concepts of student satisfaction, motivation and career orientation (Felten and Lambert 2020), as well as principles of reflective and participatory learning (Suyo-Vega 2024). This section included items assessing overall satisfaction (B1); specific dimensions of teaching quality, course attractiveness, instructor responsiveness and perceived gender neutrality (B2); items measuring the seminar's impact on motivation, confidence in study programme choice and professional inspiration (B3–B7) and an evaluation of the innovative character of the approach (B8). Concluding open-ended items (B9–B11) allowed students to identify both inspiring and less beneficial aspects of the seminar and to provide recommendations for improvement. Together, these measures provided a comprehensive picture of the seminar's effectiveness and enhanced the understanding of how participatory and gender-sensitive teaching approaches influence professional development.

Based on theoretical and empirical considerations, the study tested the following hypotheses:

- H1: Teaching professionalism positively correlates with instructors' pedagogical responsiveness to students' individual needs and students' perceived attractiveness to and interest in the course.
- H2: The relevance of course content positively correlates with students' confidence in their choice of study programme.
- H3: Course attractiveness positively correlates with students' motivation to complete their studies.
- H4: Female students rate the attractiveness and relevance of course content higher than male students.
- H5: Female students rate the gender-neutral presentation of the field higher than male students.

Qualitative part of the study

The qualitative component of the study aimed to explore in depth the experiences of students enrolled in special education programmes, with particular attention to the perspectives of male students, who represent a minority within this predominantly female field. This approach complemented the quantitative survey by providing nuanced insights into participants' motivations, perceptions of course content and teaching methods and reflections on gender-related aspects of the field.

Based on theoretical and empirical considerations, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which elements of the special education course do students perceive as most motivating and inspiring, and how do these preferences differ between male and female students?
- RQ 2: Which aspects of the course do students perceive as less beneficial or engaging, and are there gender differences in these evaluations?
- RQ 3: What recommendations and suggestions do students propose to improve the quality of teaching, the attractiveness of the course, and career orientation, particularly regarding gender balance and practical training?

Participants

In the quantitative part of the study, the informants were first-year students from the two participating universities (CU and UJEP) enrolled in special education degree programmes. A total of 115 informants took part in the seminar's evaluation, of whom 98 (85.2%) were female and 17 (14.8%) were male. This disproportion reflects the characteristics of the student population, where certain programmes exhibit a marked gender imbalance. Therefore, when interpreting gender differences, the low number of male informants must be taken into account, as this may have affected the statistical power of the analyses. The mean age of the informants was 22.3 years (median = 22; SD = 2.998). Most students were aged between 20 and 24, with an overall age range spanning 19 to 39 years. Older students (over 27) were only marginally represented. This profile corresponds to the typical composition of bachelor's and consecutive master's programmes, allowing the course to be assessed primarily from the perspective of a younger student population. Regarding the year of study, first-year students were most represented (64 students, 55.7%), followed by second-year students (44 students, 38.3%) and third-year students (seven students, 6.1%). This distribution indicates that the evaluation is most relevant for lower-year students, whereas conclusions concerning older students should be interpreted with caution due to their limited representation.

In the qualitative part of the study, data were collected from three online focus groups and one individual interview conducted in December 2024 as part of the Special Education Teacher–Inspiration for Career Choice Project. The 11 participants were enrolled in special education programmes at two universities (CU and UJEP). Given their relative underrepresentation in the field, male students were specifically included to gain insight into their experiences and challenges.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data analysis focused on the relationships between the selected dimensions of seminar evaluation and the identification of gender differences. Because the assessments were based on Likert scales, Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficients (ρ) were used for correlation analyses, which are appropriate for ordinal data. To compare groups by gender, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was employed as an alternative to the t-test, with effect sizes expressed as rank–biserial correlations (r). Notably, the sample was not gender balanced, with a predominance of female informants, which may have influenced some between-group differences. Nevertheless, the results reflect the actual gender composition of the field, where women have historically constituted most students.

Besides the quantitative analysis, the questionnaire gathered responses to open-ended items. As part of the seminar evaluation, participants were asked three primary questions: (1) which aspects of the seminar they considered most engaging, motivating and inspiring; (2) which aspects they perceived as less interesting or unnecessary and (3) suggestions and recommendations for improving the seminar. These qualitative responses were analysed with respect to gender (male vs. female), enabling the identification of differences in the perception of course content, instructional methods and the overall seminar structure.

The qualitative component of the study was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide targeting participants' motivation for study, educational experiences and reflections on gender-related aspects of the field. All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The initial data analysis involved open coding to identify key concepts and data fragments (Brailas et al. 2023), yielding 48 initial codes that captured nuanced aspects of students' experiences, perceptions and reflections.

Based on these codes, a thematic analysis was conducted, resulting in the organisation of data into six overarching thematic areas: (1) Evaluation of Teaching Quality, (2) Course Content, (3) Teaching Methods and Practical Training, (4) Gendered Experience and Balance in Teaching, (5) Support and Learning Climate and (6) Recommendations and Proposed Improvements. This thematic analysis enabled a systematic interpretation of the data and a detailed description of the main themes, reflecting students' experiences with special education teaching and gender equality in professional preparation.

Results

The results of this study provide a comprehensive overview of students' evaluations of the newly implemented self-experiential seminar in special education. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings highlight both the perceived strengths of the course and areas where improvements could enhance student engagement, learning outcomes and inclusivity.

Quantitative Results

The results of the correlational analysis indicated that individual aspects of teaching were positively interrelated, confirming a holistic perception of its quality. A moderate positive correlation was found between teaching professionalism and instructors' responsiveness to students' individual needs ($\rho = 0.408$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students who rate the teaching as professional also perceive the instructor as approachable and supportive.

A strong positive correlation was observed between professionalism and both teaching quality and course attractiveness ($\rho = 0.658$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that students perceive well-delivered instruction as stimulating and motivating. Additionally, the relationship between instructor responsiveness and course attractiveness was moderately strong and positive ($\rho = 0.507$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the link between pedagogical sensitivity and students' interest in the course.

		Professionalism and quality of teaching	Teacher's responsiveness to one's learning needs	Attractiveness and interest in teaching
Professionalism and quality of teaching	Spearman's rho	—		
	Df	—		
	p-value	—		
Teacher's responsiveness to one's learning needs	Spearman's rho	0.40849	—	
	Df	113	—	
	p-value	< 0.001	—	
Attractiveness and interest in teaching	Spearman's rho	0.65828	0.50735	—
	Df	113	113	—
	p-value	< 0.001	< 0.001	—

Table 2: Spearman's correlation matrix between key dimensions of teaching evaluation ($N = 115$)

Further analysis focused on the relationship between the perceived relevance of course content and its impact on students' confidence in their choice of study programme. A moderate positive correlation was observed ($\rho = 0.418$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that students who consider the course content practically and professionally valuable also exhibit higher confidence in their choice of study programme.

		Relevance of the course content	Influences one's confidence in choosing the right field of study
Relevance of the course content	Spearman's rho	—	
	Df	—	
	p-value	—	
Influences one's confidence in choosing the right field of study	Spearman's rho	0.41784	—
	Df	113	—

Table 3: Spearman's correlation between the relevance of course content and confidence in choosing a field of study (N = 115)

Similarly, a positive correlation was found between course attractiveness and its impact on students' motivation to complete their studies ($\rho = 0.481$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, higher ratings of course attractiveness are associated with increased study motivation and a strengthened commitment to completing the programme. Together, these results confirm that perceptions of teaching quality are multidimensional, with professionalism, pedagogical responsiveness, attractiveness and content relevance mutually reinforcing one another.

		Attractiveness and interest in the teaching	Influences one's motivation to complete one's studies
Attractiveness and interest of the teaching	Spearman's rho	—	
	Df	—	
	p-value	—	
Influences one's motivation to complete one's studies	Spearman's rho	0.48111	—
	Df	113	—
	p-value	< 0.001	—

Table 4: Spearman's correlation between attractiveness of teaching and motivation to complete your studies (N = 115)

Gender differences in course evaluations

Non-parametric Mann–Whitney U tests were used to examine gender differences in course evaluations. The analysis revealed several statistically significant differences between male and female students. Overall course satisfaction was higher among female students ($U = 559$, $p = 0.017$, $r = 0.329$), corresponding to a medium effect size. Women also rated the gender-neutral presentation of the field significantly higher ($U = 582$, $p = 0.037$, $r = 0.301$) and perceived the course as more attractive ($U = 531$, $p = 0.010$, $r = 0.363$). The largest difference was observed in the evaluation of the relevance of course content ($U = 462$, $p = 0.002$, $r = 0.445$).

Conversely, no significant differences were found between genders in the evaluation of gender balance in field presentation, the reduction of male-related

stereotypes, the course's impact on one's motivation to complete one's studies, professional inspiration or confidence in one's choice of studies ($p > 0.05$). These results indicate that female students assign higher subjective values to the course, primarily in terms of overall satisfaction and content relevance, while evaluations of other dimensions did not differ significantly between genders.

		Statistic	P		Effect Size
Satisfaction with the course	Mann–Whitney U	559.00	0.017	Rank biserial correlation	0.3289316
Effort to present the field in a gender-neutral way	Mann–Whitney U	582.00	0.037	Rank biserial correlation	0.3013205
Attractiveness and interest in the teaching	Mann–Whitney U	531.00	0.010	Rank biserial correlation	0.3625450
Relevance of the course content	Mann–Whitney U	462.00	0.002	Rank biserial correlation	0.4453782

Table 5: Comparison of course evaluations between male and female participants – Mann–Whitney U test and effect sizes (N = 115)

Teaching professionalism positively correlated with instructors' pedagogical responsiveness and the course's attractiveness (H1). The relevance of course content was associated with increased student confidence in their choice of study programme (H2). Moreover, the attractiveness of the course positively correlated with students' motivation to complete their studies (H3). Gender differences illustrated that female students rated course attractiveness, content relevance and the gender-neutral presentation of the field as higher than male students (H4, H5).

A more in-depth interpretation of these findings suggests that female students may assign greater subjective value to aspects of the course that emphasise participatory, reflective and inclusive pedagogical approaches, which are often aligned with their expectations and experiences within the predominantly female field of special education. The observed distinctions in satisfaction, perceived attractiveness and content relevance indicate that women may experience stronger engagement with the seminar's teaching methods, whereas male students, representing a minority within the cohort, might require more explicit guidance to perceive the equivalent relevance and applicability of the course content.

Conversely, no significant gender disparities were identified in the evaluation of gender balance in the field's presentation, stereotype reduction, motivation to complete one's studies, professional inspiration or confidence in one's study choice, suggesting that the seminar provided broadly comparable benefits across genders in these domains. The predominance of female informants (85.2%) may have influenced the overall distribution of evaluations, highlighting the need to consider sample composition when interpreting gender-related outcomes.

These results have practical implications for pedagogical design in special education programmes. Enhancing male students' engagement may benefit from incorporating explicit examples of practical relevance, providing structured

opportunities for male mentorship and balancing participatory with more structured teaching components. Simultaneously, the findings underscore the importance of maintaining gender-sensitive approaches, reflective exercises and inclusive teaching methods, which help develop all students' professional identity, motivation and confidence while supporting diversity and inclusion in a historically feminised educational context.

Interpretation of open-ended questionnaire data

In the following section, these thematic categories derived from the open-ended responses are interpreted with particular attention to gender-based variations in the perception of course content and format.

Motivation and inspiration

Male students most frequently reported that field visits to schools, children's homes, socially disadvantaged communities and practical case studies were the most motivational aspects of the course. Inspirational elements also included meetings with professionals and individuals with diagnoses whose personal stories reinforced the students' professional orientation. Practical components of teaching, particularly concrete procedures and demonstrations of work in special education, supported the confirmation of the professional direction and the choice of specialisation (e.g. working in a children's home). Female students also highly valued meetings with practitioners, but placed greater emphasis on visits to schools and institutions (e.g. schools for children with hearing impairments or child welfare services). They appreciated the combination of theory and practice, as well as innovative methods, such as inclusive pedagogy, sign language and international approaches to teaching. While male students emphasised professional orientation and career confirmation, female students highlighted the pedagogical and methodological aspects of the course. Both groups, however, consistently valued field visits and guest speakers – males for their professional significance and females for their didactic relevance.

Less engaging or unnecessary aspects

Male students generally did not report notable negative aspects; minor comments primarily concerned Friday seminars, longer theoretical blocks, administrative tasks or extensive materials. Female students were more critical, mentioning the repetition of topics, excessively long reflections, administrative complications and occasionally formal lectures perceived as having less added value. Overall, male students were less critical and often did not identify unnecessary components, whereas female students highlighted areas considered less beneficial or overly formal.

Recommendations and suggestions for improvement

Male students suggested increasing practical teaching and field visits, providing more real-world examples, enhancing seminars' organisation, clarifying content structure and balancing perspectives. They also recommended modernising materials and the learning environment (e.g. study information system and classrooms). Female students emphasised the need for more field visits, careful planning and reduced administrative burdens. Some highlighted the value of a greater focus on didactic and methodological demonstrations linking theory with practice. Both groups agreed on the necessity of strengthening the practical elements of the course. Male students stressed a professional orientation, while female students emphasised pedagogical and organisational aspects. Women more frequently pointed out deficiencies in planning, whereas men were more concerned with content structure and course variety.

Qualitative Results

Evaluation of teaching quality

Students generally evaluated the quality of teaching positively. Key aspects highlighted were the high level of instructors' expertise, the academic prestige of the faculty and the individualised approach to students. Informants appreciated direct contact with leading professionals in the field and the opportunity for personal interaction.

»I have a point of comparison. [...] I have never encountered a situation in which the lecturer was not qualified. [...] They know us by name.«

»At Charles University, we have those doctors and associate professors. [...] Here, we have genuinely qualified professionals.«

Meanwhile, some instructors observed indications of power imbalances, and an authoritative teaching style was observed in some instructors, highlighting the need to further develop a pedagogical culture based on collaborative communication. Students also expressed a desire for greater involvement in curriculum design and participatory teaching:

»I would welcome more space for discussion and the co-creation of the study programme's content.«

The high level of instructors' expertise contributes to strengthening students' professional identities and their motivation to learn; participatory forms of teaching could further enhance engagement and their sense of co-creating the educational process.

Course content

Participants identified gaps in course content, particularly insufficient coverage of areas such as autism spectrum disorders and specific learning disabilities. The curriculum was also criticised for its excessive focus on early childhood, which some students perceived as less engaging, especially for male students:

»There is a lack of a course focused on autism spectrum disorder. [...] Specific learning disorders are only addressed marginally.«

»For me, the focus on early childhood is a bit too much. [...] It feels too 'maternal'.«

Students recommended integrating topics related to physical education or other activities traditionally perceived as 'masculine', which could enhance the appeal of the programme for male students and broaden their professional competencies. Overall, the course content is academically robust; however, it insufficiently reflects a wider range of practical situations and diverse professional roles, which affects the attractiveness of the field for minority groups.

Teaching methods and practical training

Students highlighted a lack of practical experience and limited opportunities to choose placements. The current organisation of practical training is rigid and does not allow students to tailor their experiences according to their intended specialisation (e.g. pedagogical–psychological counselling, advisory services or school settings):

»Currently, we have 12 hours of practical training per semester. [...] It is too little. [...] We don't have the chance to engage with the target group.«

»I would welcome the option to choose our placements. [...] I would like to go into advisory services.«

Comparisons with other institutions indicate that the autonomous selection of placements augments students' motivation and professional confidence. Practical experience is a key motivational factor that supports professional development. A more flexible and individualised organisation of placements could significantly ameliorate student satisfaction and the effectiveness of teaching.

Gendered experience and balance in teaching

Male students constitute a minority in special education programmes, creating so-called »hypervisibility«. Their presence is often positively perceived. However, it simultaneously generates feelings of reduced anonymity and

performance pressure. Linguistic practices, such as addressing the group predominantly as »female students«, reinforce a sense of otherness:

»There are only two of us men. [...] We lose our anonymity.«

»When the class is addressed as 'female students', it is not ill-intentioned, but it reinforces the stereotype.«

Support from both instructors and peers is perceived positively – male students are explicitly welcomed, which requires a sensitive approach to gender-inclusive communication. Gender asymmetry does not manifest as discrimination but as symbolic visibility. It is recommended to normalise the male presence and use inclusive language that minimises the pressure to represent a »male role«.

Support and learning climates

Relationships among students and instructors are generally positive. A collegial climate facilitates collaboration, the sharing of materials and support, particularly in smaller groups. Individual support for male students is positively perceived, although heightened attention can reinforce a sense of otherness: *»I didn't feel judged; rather, they expect me to be a bit of a leader.«*

The social climate promotes inclusion and motivation; however, it is essential to address symbolic inequalities sensitively so minority students do not experience excessive pressure.

Recommendations and proposed improvements

Based on the students' experiences within the special education programme, several key areas for improvement were identified. First, the participants recommended increasing the amount of practical training and enhancing its flexibility, enabling students to specialise according to their individual professional interests and intended career pathways. Students further suggested broadening the thematic scope of the curriculum and strengthening interdisciplinary links, for example with physical education, to support wider professional competencies and ameliorate the appeal of the programme. In addition, informants emphasised the importance of activities that raise awareness of the profession, particularly through outreach to secondary schools and peer-to-peer sharing initiatives. Other proposals included the implementation of systematic mentoring and improved programme coordination, including clearer organisational structures and practical support, which would enhance both the effectiveness of teaching and students' professional development. Overall, these recommendations reflect the need for combining flexible practice opportunities, interdisciplinary content, strengthened career orientation and organisational stability. Such measures would support the formation of students' professional identities and enhance the attractiveness of the field.

*»Awareness raising in secondary schools, more information about the field, offering combinations, for example combined with physical education, which could attract men«.*¹

Discussion

The present study evaluated a newly implemented self-experiential seminar grounded in relational pedagogy, participatory teaching and gender-sensitive strategies with the dual aim of strengthening students' professional identities and addressing gender imbalances in special education. The findings should be interpreted considering the broader structural context of Czech special education, characterised by high professional prestige but persistent feminisation and low male representation (Doležalová 2009; Stárek 2023). Against this backdrop, the seminar functioned not merely as an innovative pedagogical intervention but as a strategic response to structural inequalities within the field.

The quantitative findings confirm that students perceive teaching quality holistically, with professionalism, pedagogical responsiveness and course attractiveness forming a mutually reinforcing cluster. The moderate to strong correlations between professionalism and responsiveness, professionalism and attractiveness, and responsiveness and attractiveness support Hypothesis 1 and align with relational pedagogy's emphasis on trust, respect and student-centred engagement (Felten and Lambert 2020; Galbally and Christodoulidi 2023).

These results suggest that perceived expertise alone is insufficient; rather, professionalism acquires pedagogical legitimacy through responsiveness to individual needs. This finding resonates with contemporary higher education research emphasising the necessity of adaptive, relationship-rich environments in increasingly diverse student populations (Gupta et al. 2023; Seemiller and Grace 2016). In special education, a profession requiring high emotional resilience and ethical responsibility (Zhang 2021), such relational qualities are particularly salient. The qualitative data reinforce this interpretation: Students valued instructors' expertise and prestige but simultaneously expressed a desire for greater participatory involvement, indicating that authoritative academic capital may coexist with a need for the dialogic co-construction of learning.

The confirmation of hypotheses 2 and 3 demonstrates that the perceived relevance of course content is positively associated with confidence in programme choice and that course attractiveness is linked to the motivation to complete one's studies. These findings substantiate theoretical claims that meaning making and perceived purpose are central to professional identity formation (Xu 2023; Zhang 2021). In relational terms, relevance appears to function as a bridge between curriculum and vocational commitment.

1 This refers to the possibility of studying not only the special education degree programme alone, but also current combinations, for example special education with a secondary school teaching subject such as the Czech language or art education for lower and upper-secondary levels.

The qualitative data provide further nuances. Male students particularly emphasised field visits, concrete case studies and exposure to practitioners as confirming their career orientations. Female students also valued practice-based components but foregrounded pedagogical innovation and methodological enrichment. This distinction suggests gender-differentiated pathways to meaning making: Men more frequently framed motivation in terms of career validation, whereas women emphasised didactic refinement and professional competence development. Such patterns may reflect broader gender socialisation processes that influence expectations of caring professions (Cameron and Billington 2024). Importantly, the strong emphasis on experiential and field-based learning validates the seminar's theoretical grounding in experiential learning theory (Morris 2019; Tomkins et al. 2016).

The integration of authentic contexts, reflective analysis and feedback appears to have strengthened both motivation and identity consolidation. Students' repeated calls for expanded practical training indicate that experiential components are not peripheral but central to perceived programme legitimacy. Hypotheses 4 and 5 were partially supported. Female students rated overall satisfaction, course attractiveness, content relevance and gender-neutral presentation significantly higher than male students, with medium effect sizes. These distinctions may be interpreted in several ways.

First, participatory and reflective pedagogies may align more closely with the expectations and experiences of students who are already socially integrated into a feminised professional culture (Schutz and Zembylas 2016). Women, constituting the majority (85.2%), may experience these approaches as congruent with normative communicative styles within the field. Male students positioned as a minority may require a more explicit framing of relevance and applicability to perceive equivalent value.

Second, qualitative findings reveal the phenomenon of »hypervisibility« among male students. Although not associated with overt discrimination, symbolic visibility and linguistic practices (e.g. generic feminine forms of address) contributed to feelings of otherness. This observation corresponds with research highlighting the ambivalent positioning of men in feminised professions simultaneously welcomed and marked as exceptional (Cameron and Billington 2024).

The absence of significant gender disparities in perceived stereotype reductions or the motivation to complete one's studies suggests that the seminar succeeded in mitigating overt exclusion; however, symbolic asymmetries persist at the level of everyday communicative practices. Notably, no gender differences were found in the motivation to complete one's studies, professional inspiration or confidence in one's programme choice. This indicates that, despite differential ratings of attractiveness and relevance, the seminar generated broadly comparable structural benefits across genders. In this respect, the intervention may be understood as inclusive in its outcome, even if experienced differently in the process.

The qualitative findings also revealed perceived gaps in curricular breadth, particularly regarding autism spectrum disorders and specific learning

disabilities. Moreover, some male students described the strong emphasis on early childhood as »maternal«, suggesting that curricular symbolism may influence perceptions of professional fit. This aligns with Doležalová's (2009) earlier observations concerning gendered perceptions of caring professions in the Czech context.

However, proposals to incorporate elements such as physical education must be interpreted cautiously. While expanding the interdisciplinary scope may enhance attractiveness, reinforcing stereotypically »masculine« domains risks re-essentialising gender roles. A more theoretically grounded response would involve diversifying representations of professional practice without reproducing binary constructions of gender. Relational pedagogy, with its focus on inclusion and co-created meaning (Felten and Lambert 2020), offers a framework for achieving this balance.

The seminar's emphasis on mentoring, field exposure and reflective dialogue corresponds with the literature highlighting the importance of significant relationships in professional identity development (ibid.; Knissarina 2024). Both quantitative correlations and qualitative narratives indicate that identity consolidation occurs through interactions with authentic professional communities. In highly feminised fields, the presence of male role models may serve as a protective and normalising factor (Cameron and Billington 2024). The male participants' appreciation of encounters with practitioners supports this claim. Yet the findings also suggest that identity formation is not solely gender specific; rather, relational and experiential pedagogies strengthen resilience, confidence and vocational commitment across the cohort. From a structural perspective, the seminar demonstrates that targeted pedagogical innovation can address gender imbalances without resorting to compensatory or segregative measures. By embedding gender sensitivity within mainstream teaching rather than isolating it as a supplementary component, the intervention aligns with inclusive education principles (Geurts et al. 2023; Moriña 2020).

The self-experiential seminar achieved its principal objectives. It successfully integrated theory with practice, strengthened professional identities and fostered motivation and confidence among students. While gender differences in perceived attractiveness and relevance persist, the absence of disparities in motivational and commitment-related outcomes suggests that the intervention contributes meaningfully to inclusive professional preparation. In a field marked by entrenched gender imbalances yet increasing professional complexity (Bínová and Havelka 2021; Dorozhovets et al. 2021), relational, participatory and experiential pedagogies represent not merely methodological innovations but strategic instruments for cultivating a resilient, diverse and ethically grounded generation of special educators.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant consideration. The predominance of female informants may have influenced the statistical distributions of the evaluation

scores. The qualitative sample ($N = 11$) provides depth but limits generalisability. Additionally, self-report measures capture perceived rather than objectively measured professional competence or long-term retention in the field. Longitudinal research is required to determine whether enhanced motivation translates into sustained professional commitment, particularly among male graduates.

Conclusion

This study evaluated a newly developed self-experiential seminar for special education students using a mixed-methods approach. Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire survey administered to first-year students enrolled in special education programmes at Charles University and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University. The survey included both closed-ended Likert-scale items and open-ended questions capturing students' subjective experiences, evaluations of teaching quality, course attractiveness, motivation and career orientation. The qualitative component was conducted through semi-structured interviews in focus groups, supplemented by one individual interview, with a particular focus on the experiences of male students who represent a minority in this predominantly female field.

All data were anonymised, standardised and analysed using a combination of statistical methods (Spearman's rank-order correlations, Mann–Whitney U tests) and thematic analysis, ensuring both the objectivity of quantitative measures and an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences.

The quantitative results indicated that key dimensions of teaching – professionalism, pedagogical responsiveness, course attractiveness and content relevance – are positively interrelated, confirming a holistic perception of teaching quality. Positive relationships were observed between teaching professionalism and instructors' responsiveness, professionalism and course attractiveness and course attractiveness and students' motivation to complete their studies.

Furthermore, the relevance of course content was associated with students' confidence in their choice of study programme. Gender differences revealed that female students rated overall satisfaction, course attractiveness, content relevance and the gender-neutral presentation of the field higher than male students, reflecting gendered perceptions in this predominantly female discipline. No significant differences were found in motivation, professional inspiration or confidence in one's study choice, suggesting broadly comparable benefits across genders in these domains.

The qualitative findings provided deeper insights into students' experiences and highlighted areas for improvement. Male students valued professional orientation, career confirmation and practical field experiences, while female students emphasised pedagogical and methodological aspects, the integration of theory and practice and organisational clarity.

Both groups consistently appreciated experiential components, including field visits and guest speakers, which strengthened their professional identities

and motivation. However, gaps were identified in the coverage of specific content areas, the flexibility of practical training and inclusivity in addressing the needs of minority groups. Male students experienced »hypervisibility« in a feminised context, highlighting the importance of inclusive communication and normalising minority presences.

This study underscores the critical role of participatory, gender-sensitive and practically oriented teaching approaches in special education programmes. Enhancing practical training, broadening curriculum content and providing tailored support for minority students can strengthen engagement, professional identity and career readiness for all participants.

Statement on access to research data

Data are not digitized

The research data used in this article are not digitized. They are stored in analogue form by the authors and are available upon justified request.

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MOŠKI V SPECIALNI PEDAGOGIKI: IZKUSTVENI SEMINAR ZA KREPITEV PROFESIONALNE IDENTITETE

Povzetek: Namen raziskave je bil opisati in ovrednotiti novo razviti izkustveni seminar, namenjen študentom Pedagoške fakultete. Seminar je bil zasnovan kot odziv na dolgotrajno podzastopanost moških v programih specialne pedagogike na Karlovi univerzi in Univerzi Jana Evangelista Purkyněja. Združeval je praktično učenje, mentorstvo in vodenje refleksije o profesionalni identiteti, s posebnim poudarkom na spolno občutljivih pristopih ter povečanju privlačnosti področja za študente. Uporabljen je bil mešani raziskovalni pristop, ki je vključeval vprašalnik (N = 115) in fokusne skupine z moškimi udeleženci (N = 11). Rezultati so pokazali, da so zaznana strokovnost poučevanja, pedagoška odzivnost in privlačnost predmeta pozitivno povezane z zaupanjem študentov v svojo poklicno izbiro. Študenti so poročali o večji izpostavljenosti in pritisku, povezanem z njihovim manjšinskim položajem, hkrati pa so kot pomemben vir podpore poudarili predavatelje in vrstnike. Ugotovitve kažejo, da metode, uporabljene v seminarju, krepijo profesionalno identiteto, motivacijo in občutek lastne učinkovitosti, obenem pa predstavljajo prenosljiv model, ki povezuje teorijo in prakso ter spodbuja raznolikost v vzgojno-izobraževalnih poklicih.

Ključne besede: spolni stereotipi, poklicna izbira, izkustveni seminar, mešani raziskovalni pristop

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