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TEACHERS CO-ORGANIZING EDUCATION IN THE OPINIONS OF SUBJECT TEACHERS IN THE POLISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

The study is a presentation of the competence and cooperation of teachers co-organizing education in mainstream schools, presented through the prism of the narrative of subject teachers. In the topic literature, the issue of evaluation of cooperation with special educators, reviewed by teachers conducting subject education, is rarely discussed.

The aim of the study is to learn about the subjective assessment of the competences of special educators and their cooperation with subject teachers. In order to achieve the aim of the research, the main research problem was formulated: How do subject teachers perceive and assess the competences and cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education process. The adopted research procedure uses a qualitative strategy, the method of individual cases, the structured interview technique and the teacher's interview questionnaire tool in our own study. On the basis of the conducted research, it was found that the quality of work of a teacher co-organizing the education process of SEN pupils is determined not only by their knowledge and skills, i.e. professional competences, but also by personality competences. Teacher collaboration in the classroom is one of the main factors determining educational success. Teachers co-organizing the education process and subject teachers should therefore closely cooperate with each other, adopting single-track goals, tasks and strategies for working with SEN pupils, who should be the most important link in this cooperation. Teacher collaboration in the classroom is one of the main factors determining educational success. Teachers co-organizing the education process and subject teachers should therefore closely cooperate with each other, adopting single-track goals, tasks and strategies for working with SEN pupils, who should be the most important link in this cooperation.

KEYWORDS: *special educator, teacher co-organizing education, subject teacher, inclusive education, competences of the co-organizing teacher, special educational needs*

INTRODUCTION

The education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), both in Poland and worldwide, has changed over the last two decades, shifting from education in special educational institutions to education together with non-disabled peers in mainstream schools. This change required a number of legal and organizational actions resulting in the provision of appropriate learning conditions, both for non-disabled pupils and those with special educational needs (Kauffman, Hornby, 2020; Zamkowska, 2017; Woodcock, Anderson, 2025), as well as the implementation of new methodological assumptions related to conducting functional diagnosis (Rispoli et al., 2016), universal design (Craig, Smith, Frey, 2022; Flood, Banks, 2021) or the implementation of technologies to support communication (Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, Fernández-Cerero, 2022; del Palomino, 2018). The School Education Act of 7 September 1991 (Dz. U. 2004 nr 256 poz. 2572 z późn. zm.) enabled children with various disabilities to attend mainstream schools. After the introduction of inclusive education, inclusive education became the next step in the education of children with SEN. John and Baylis (quoted in Zacharuk, 2011, p. 2) state that *inclusion is more than integration. It rejects the traditional approach to people with disabilities, proposes to recognize the phenomenon of disability as part of the experience of humanity and to treat it as a central issue in the planning of services serving people*. In the context of education, according to the UNESCO Guidelines (2005), inclusion is seen as a process of taking into account and responding to the diversity of needs of all pupils, by increasing their participation in education, culture and society, and reducing exclusion both within and outside education.

The position of a teacher co-organizing education, occupied by specialists with training in special education, is relatively new in the Polish education system. This is due to the fact that, until 2022, in mainstream schools, these specialists were employed only if the institution was attended by pupils with a special education certificate. Currently, after the entry into force of legal regulations aimed at, among other things, the implementation of inclusion, every educational institution requires the employment of a special educator whose task is to co-organize the education process (Bartuś, 2023). In addition,

special educators continue to be employed as support teachers in classes where compulsory education is carried out by SEN pupils. It often happens, especially in the case of small institutions, that both functions are performed by the same person.

The legislation specifying the requirements for the employment of a teacher co-organizing education and the qualifications held by the teacher includes, first of all, the Act of 14 December 2016, the Law on School Education, and then its regulations implementing rules.

Pursuant to Article 127 of the Act of 14 December 2016, the Law on School Education, special education is provided to children and young people with disabilities, at risk or with social maladjustment, who require special organization of learning and working methods, and who are entrusted to specialists, including special educators who co-organize the education process (Dz. U. 2024 poz. 737).

With reference to the Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Science of 14 September 2023 on the detailed qualifications required of teachers, it should be noted that, first of all, a person who has completed a long-cycle Master's degree programme in the field of special education and has pedagogical training is qualified to take the position of a teacher additionally employed to co-organize education. The Regulation also sets out in detail other options for the qualifications obtained, allowing for the employment of specialists who obtained them before the entry into force of the new qualification framework for the profession of special educator (MEiN, 2023).

Pursuant to the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education of 9 August 2017, a teacher co-organizing education should have appropriate qualifications in special education. The legislation stipulates that the head of a given institution is responsible for employing a co-organizing teacher in accordance with a given type of disability, after analyzing the special education certificate of a pupil and the recommendations contained therein. In accordance with the Regulation, special educators conduct classes and classes specified in the curriculum together with other teachers, as well as educational work. Special educators provide teachers, specialists and tutors with assistance in the selection of forms and methods of work with pupils. These teachers also conduct rehabilitation classes in accordance with their qualifications (MEN, 2017).

Another piece of legislation indicating the need to employ a special educator as a teacher co-organizing education is the Regulation of the Ministry of Education and Science of 22 July 2022. The purpose of this act is to introduce special educators to public schools and other educational institutions as a specialist performing tasks in the field of psychological and pedagogical support. These tasks include:

- cooperation with teachers, group tutors, other specialists, parents, as well as with pupils;
- recommending the measures to the head to ensure accessibility and implementation of active and full participation of pupils in the life of the school and institution;
- conducting examinations and diagnostic activities related to the identification of individual educational needs and psychological and physical abilities of pupils;
- solving teaching and educational problems of pupil;
- determining the conditions necessary for learning;
- cooperating with the team in the development and implementation of an individual educational-and-therapeutic programme for pupils with a special education certificate and their psychological and pedagogical support;
- supporting other teachers in helping to identify the causes of educational failures and difficulties in the functioning of pupils; adapting methods and forms of work and teaching resources; providing psychological and pedagogical support to pupils, parents and teachers; presenting proposals for in-service teacher training to the teaching council (MEiN, 2022).

It is worth noting that the tasks formulated in legal acts only define the framework scope of cooperation, without specifying exactly how this cooperation should proceed (Zamkowska 2017; Zamkowska, Nogaj 2024). Regardless of the analysis of the regulations, it should be emphasized that the requirement to take into account the recommendations contained in the special education certificate when working with pupils with disabilities remains unchanged and applies to all teachers, regardless of the type of position or qualifications held (Soszyńska, 2021).

The quality of the education system strictly depends on the pedagogues who organize and manage the teaching and educational process. The competences possessed by people working with pupils with disabilities are important in the process of supporting the holistic development of SEN pupils.

According to the definition of the professional task of a special educator prepared by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, a special educator prepares people with disabilities to function independently in society. In particular, she diagnoses functional, developmental and educational needs; programs methods to counteract the consequences of disability, as well as provides educational support to people with SEN and their families (MRPiPS, 2018).

In order to carry out all the professional tasks set for a special educator, he or she must have a number of competences. Czerepaniak-Walczak (2001) points out that the concept of competence should be understood both as the scope of acquired qualifications and the possession of certain predispositions acquired by learning specific skills. Among the wide range of competences of a special educator, Kupisiewicz (2013) mentions: substantive, didactic and psychological and pedagogical, communication, cooperation, creative, IT and technical, personality, and moral and ethical.

The main professional competences of a special educator defined by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2018) include: supporting and activating the development of a person with a disability, taking into account their individual needs and values, and shaping the attitudes of children and their success in the process of education, upbringing and integration of people with disabilities and non-disabled people.

In addition to the relevant qualifications and the resulting professional competences, there are also personality traits of the co-organizing teacher. As Celuch and Czarnocka (2024) point out, it is important that the person who holds this position inspires trust, has a sense of observation, is outgoing and knows how to listen. Empathy, understanding, patience, sensitivity and respect, and creativity are also key qualities.

From the perspective of relations with SEN pupils, moral, ethical and personality competences of teachers become particularly important, and in their scope: humanitarianism, self-improvement, maintaining a proportion between internal and external control, the ability to self-reflect, responsibility,

acceptance of oneself and one's professional role, heuristic activity, prospective view of a person with a disability, updating grades, a realistic approach to pupils' abilities and achievements, as well as optimism, perseverance, patience, as well as triggering and experiencing emotions together with the pupils (Kupisiewicz 2016).

RESEARCH METHODS

The aim of the study was to learn about the subjective assessment of subject teachers regarding the competences and cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education process.

The main problem was focused on: How do subject teachers perceive and evaluate competences and cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education process? In the context of the above main problem, the following specific problems have been formulated:

1. How do subject teachers assess their satisfaction with cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education of SEN pupils?
2. What professional and social competences do subject teachers consider to be the most important in special educators cooperating with them?
3. How is the cooperation between the teacher co-organizing education and subject teachers carried out?
4. What factors determine the quality of cooperation between subject teachers and co-organizers?
5. How do subject teachers perceive their role in cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education process?
6. What challenges do subject teachers face in cooperation with teachers co-organizing education?

The adopted research procedure uses a qualitative strategy, with the method of individual cases, the structured interview technique (Rubacha 2008) and a tool – an interview questionnaire with the teacher in our own study. The questionnaire contained eight open-ended questions and two semi-open-ended questions. The questions addressed subject teachers' opinions

regarding collaboration with teachers co-organizing the education of students with special educational needs (SEN), specifically: satisfaction, professional and social competencies, factors influencing this collaboration, the role of teachers, and challenges. The study included randomly selected 15 subject teachers, cooperating with teachers co-organizing the education process of SEN pupils. All respondents were women (15 people), most of them over 41 years of age (11 people), with work experience over 17 years (11 people) and a professional promotion grade – chartered teacher (13 people). Among the respondents there were both teachers of the first stage of education – early school education (4 people) and the second stage: teachers of humanities (6 people), natural sciences (3 people) and science (2 people). The obtained results were subjected to the coding procedure (Flick, 2012), and then the categories of data analysis were determined, in which the satisfaction expressed by subject teachers with cooperation with teachers co-organizing the process of educating SEN pupils was taken as the main premise.

RESULTS

The research used research methods and techniques appropriate to the adopted strategy. According to the analysis of the obtained data, the majority (8 people) of the respondents rated the cooperation as good, indicating their involvement in the activities undertaken: *a lot depends on the teacher and his approach to duties* (p.11), *co-organizing teachers improve the individualization process and discipline pupils who cause problems* (p.12); substantive help and educational support: *a lot of help from the teacher, support in the teaching process* (p.2), *the lady was a support during trips, but she focused mainly on her pupil* (p.14). Attention was also paid to the adopted division of responsibilities and the way they are carried out in the classroom as well as the recognition of authority: *this teacher does not undermine my opinion towards pupils, he is willing to cooperate and willingly uses tips for tasks and to work with children* (p.6). It was also pointed out that the described good cooperation does not always apply to all teachers: *most of the teachers co-organizing education cooperate closely with me, but not always* (p.15). Quite often, the respondents also

marked the answer very well (4 people), most often justifying their choice with the appropriate, according to subject teachers, scope of cooperation: *they cooperate in the development of materials, work plans* (p.8), *the teacher helps to organize work, controls the progress of SEN pupils* “ (p.10), *documents are developed together, test adjustments, etc.* (p.13); willingness to undertake this cooperation: *teachers are willing to cooperate* (p.8), *cooperation is very good* (p.13); as well as the competences of the co-organizing teachers: *a competent teacher, knows his job, knows what to do* (p.7). Among the respondents, there were also three people who badly assessed the cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education of SEN pupils. Indications of a such opinion concerned primarily the lack of cooperation and the fulfillment of their duties: *teachers co-organizing education do not fulfill their duties* (p.4), as well as commitment and the willingness to take action: *in principle, lack of cooperation due to low commitment and lack of willingness to cooperate* (p.5).

The professional competence of special educators is another factor indicated by subject teachers. The largest group of surveyed teachers who positively assessed the work of teachers co-organizing education indicated as the most important competences aimed at supporting SEN pupils, their parents and guardians: gathering knowledge about pupils with disabilities, organizing rehabilitation, teaching and educational activities, cooperating with and providing assistance to parents and guardians of pupils, as well as preparing a professional assessment of dysfunctions and potential of pupils with SEN. On the other hand, teachers who negatively assessed cooperation with special educators as the most important competences shaping the attitudes of non-disabled pupils in the process of integration with pupils with disabilities and collecting information about SEN pupils. All subject teachers assessing cooperation with special educators indicated that their most important social competences were: showing understanding and respect for every pupil with a disability and perceiving diversity as a natural aspect in educational and therapeutic activities. In addition, teachers describing cooperation as very good and good emphasized being guided by the principles of professional ethics, including compliance with the principles of honesty, reliability and confidentiality, while teachers assessing satisfaction with cooperation as bad

indicated taking responsibility for the consequences of their own educational, educational and caring activities addressed to their pupils.

Another research problem concerned the manner of implementation of the described cooperation of teachers co-organizing education with subject teachers. Educators assessing the cooperation as good pointed primarily to the activities required by the regulations on the development of documentation required for a SEN pupil, such as an individual educational-and-therapeutic programme (IPET) and a multifaceted specialist assessment of the pupil's functioning level (WOPFU): *the teacher co-organizing education collects the pupil's documentation with the certificate, some of them are involved in the creation of such documentation and closely cooperate with the school counsellor* (p.6), *preparation of WOPFU, adjustments, summary of work after each semester, exchange of comments, support for each other* (p.9), *we prepare content for pupils together on an ongoing basis* (p.11), *joint development of documentation such as IPET, WOPFU, adaptation of educational requirements* (p.12). Two people appreciated the broader involvement of the co-organizing teacher: *he makes sure that the pupil with the certificate learns as much as possible during a given lesson, but also consolidates the material with the pupil outside the lesson* (p.15), *supervising the pupils work, motivating the pupil, guiding him/her, helping in the preparation of teaching materials* (p.2). One person also pointed out the incorrect understanding of duties and the lack of commitment to full cooperation: *cooperation is limited, you only take care of your pupil* (p.14). In the group of teachers, where the cooperation was assessed as very good, the creation of documentation required by regulations was also indicated. Additional activities were also mentioned, which included, among others: *constant contact with specialists and parents, and cooperation in the indicated activities based on discussion was emphasized: "conversations, joint problem solving, development of IPETs, WOPFU* (p.13), *joint creation of WOPFU, IPET, discussing tests, progress, educational problems, conversations with parents, participation in team meetings, lessons with more demonstrations* (p.8), *the co-organizing teacher is in constant contact with a school counselor, psychologist* (p.10), *helps in organizing events, writing WOPFU, IPET* (p.7). A group of teachers who badly evaluated the discussed cooperation pointed to particular passivity in the activities of the special educator: *teachers are usually only present during lessons* (p.3),

it is limited to the presence of the teacher during the lesson, although not always (p.4), lack of willingness to cooperate and low involvement (p.5).

Next, the surveyed teachers were asked about the factors determining the quality of the discussed cooperation. In the group of respondents assessing their cooperation as good, the importance of proper communication was emphasized: *cooperation, good communication (p.2), talking about one's ideas, observations (p.9), communicativeness (p.11), mutual understanding, articulating mutual needs and expectations (p.12), well-developed cooperation, establishing mutual expectations, discussing ideas, arrangements, etc. (p.15).* Many personality competences that have a positive impact on interpersonal relationships were also indicated: *what kind of people they are – their approach to working with children and their willingness to cooperate with others (p.6), openness to each other, maturity of the person, competences (p.9), good intentions (p.11), willingness to help, sharing responsibilities, awareness (p.12), motivation to work, interest (p.14).* A group of teachers describing the cooperation as very good, in addition to proper communication and personality traits, also mentioned appropriate: *competences, mutual understanding, division of tasks (p.10), establishing the rules of cooperation (p.13), a person with experience in the school who provides consultations (p.8);* as well as mutual respect and recognition of authority: *the teacher in charge must treat the co-organizer as a partner, on an equal footing (p.7), good intentions of both parties, commitment (p.8).* On the other hand, the group evaluating cooperation badly pointed to the importance of professional competences in terms of substantive knowledge and knowledge of the functioning capabilities of a SEN pupil: *good knowledge of the needs of pupils (p.3), proper communication, willingness to work, competence and knowledge to work with pupils (p.4);* less often they mentioned personality competences: *patience, communication skills, commitment, openness to cooperation and exchange of experiences (p.5).*

The surveyed subject teachers perceive their role in cooperation with teachers co-organizing the education process in different ways. Educators who positively assess the cooperation describe themselves as a co-organizer who, by way of an agreement, is to establish strategies for activities carried out with SEN pupils. In the group assessing cooperation as good, the role of the co-organizer is more about arrangements on the part of the subject teacher: *I agree with*

the teacher co-organizing the learning process (what should be practiced with the children during lessons or revalidation) (p.6), as a subject specialist, I have to determine the material on the basis of which the co-organizer works (p.11), determining the method of individualization of the teaching process of a pupil with a disability as well as the forms and methods of work (p.12); and less often it is understood as an agreement: we jointly determine the way of working with the child during the lesson, we discuss the child's skills and needs (p.9), exchange of information, observations, teaching materials (p.15). In the statements in the group evaluating cooperation as well, there is more mutual involvement of teachers: joint consultations with the co-organizing teacher (p.8), cooperation is the basis of good work, the division of tasks facilitates cooperation (p.10). On the other hand, in the group assessing cooperation worse, teachers pointed to the need to take over the tasks of the co-organizing teacher: the teacher limits himself to attending my lessons, while most of his duties fall on me (p.4).

In order to improve the quality of the described cooperation, subject teachers use a variety of strategies and undertake additional initiatives. These include, above all, a conversation and the introduction of work arrangements: *at the beginning, I determine the division of roles and tasks in a given class and we respond to the pupils needs on an ongoing basis (p.6).* As additional activities, they indicate situations that allow to increase the authority of the teacher co-organizing education by involving in conducting lessons: *sometimes I involve the co-organizing teacher in conducting lessons to increase his authority in the eyes of pupils, who should treat him with due respect, which is not always the case (p.15);* participation in meetings with parents of the whole class: *I often emphasized the role of the co-organizing teacher during meetings with parents, his help in work (p.10);* or the implementation of additional activities at school: *joint projects (p.13).* Teachers who assess the cooperation as bad spoke about the difficulties related to the possibility of implementing additional initiatives to improve the quality of cooperation: *it is difficult to establish work strategies if someone is not interested in fulfilling their duties (p.4).* In their statements, they draw attention to the actions they take: *I try to maintain friendly relations, ask for help and support from SEN pupils (p.4), I try to determine the ways and forms of working with pupils, the best ways and forms of work during lessons, the possibility of adapting tests or planning another form of checking knowledge (p.5).*

The last of the analyzed issues concerned the challenges faced by subject teachers in cooperation with co-organizing teachers. Educators who evaluated the cooperation well pointed mainly to the proper fulfillment of tasks by the supporting teachers: *I think that the challenge for me is to skillfully point out to the teacher that he or she should support the pupil and not do it for him* (p.2), *sometimes it is difficult to conduct lessons when the co-organizing teacher is loud, sees only the needs of one pupil and not the whole class* (p.9), *it happens that the teacher does not want to participate in the creation of documentation* (p.11). They also drew attention to the relations between teachers: *different expectations of co-organizing teachers* (p.12), *above all, good communication and mutual understanding* (p.15), *the teacher is unsympathetic, is late for lessons, relations with the child's parents do not work out* (p.14); as well as a small number of support teachers employed in the institution: *the teacher is not always present in class, too few hours or the teacher is often sent as a substitute* (p.6). In addition, people who assessed the cooperation as very good spoke on the one hand about the co-organizing teachers taking their own initiative: *sometimes it happens that the co-organizing teacher enters my competences (the tutor), but this does not result from ill will, but only from commitment* (p.10); and on the other hand, about *lack of agreement on the responsibilities of the co-organizing teacher* (p.13), *lack of own initiative, reluctance to take additional actions* (p.8) and *lack of willingness and lack of competence related to undertaking postgraduate studies or, worse, online studies* (p.8). On the other hand, teachers who assessed cooperation badly pointed mainly to *lack of willingness and commitment* (p.3), *despite my approval of the proposed strategies – lack of willingness to implement them* (p.5).

APPLICATIONS

Cooperation between teachers in scientific studies is most often presented through the prism of the teacher co-organizing education (Apanel, 2013; Gajdzica, 2011; Skura, 2018; Soszyńska, 2021; Zamkowska, 2017; Zaorska, 2022). In the presented research, it was decided to present the second point of view, i.e. the opinions of subject teachers, on this cooperation, which is increasingly

implemented in the Polish education system. For this reason, this research should be considered innovative in the discussed area, as no similar research has been conducted so far. It should be noted that the group selected for the study had a distribution similar to the population structure.

An analysis of the cooperation between subject teachers and teachers co-organizing the education of pupils with SEN revealed that the picture is positive but varied. Most subject teachers rate their cooperation with co-organizing teachers as good or very good, which indicates a generally positive attitude towards this form of cooperation. At the same time, there are cases of dissatisfaction, mainly resulting from a lack of commitment, failure to fulfil obligations and passivity on the part of some co-organizing teachers.

According to the research conducted both the professional competences (especially in terms of supporting pupils with SEN and their families) and social competences (such as empathy, respect, openness, professional ethics) of co-organizing teachers are essentially decisive for the quality of cooperation. Teachers emphasize that without the right personal competences, it is difficult to achieve effective joint and consistent action in an inclusive classroom.

The cooperation between the teacher co-organizing education and subject teachers mainly concerns the preparation of documentation specified in regulations, as well as broadly understood support for pupils during and outside of classes. In addition, the research also indicated constant contact with specialists and parents, as well as sharing observations about pupils. The key factors determining effective cooperation were considered to be: proper communication, mutual respect, recognition of authority and a clear division of tasks between teachers.

With regard to the role of subject teachers in the process of co-organizing education, the research conducted allows us to conclude that teachers who evaluate cooperation positively perceive themselves as co-organizers of the teaching process, co-deciding on the course of education for students with SEN. On the other hand, teachers who assessed cooperation negatively often feel burdened with additional tasks belonging to the co-organizing teacher.

However, when identifying the challenges faced by subject teachers in collaboration with co-organizers, it was determined that there is a need for greater involvement and initiative on the part of co-organizers. Even among

respondents who positively assess the collaboration, there are voices regarding insufficient initiative on the part of special education teachers. This indicates the need to strengthen the active attitude and responsibility of co-organizers for the collaborative learning process.

As established, in order to improve cooperation, teachers should be assigned tasks involving co-organizing activities such as discussions, joint arrangements, teaching and educational activities, and engaging them in broadly understood aspects of school life. These solutions may be limited by the partial lack of motivation and commitment on the part of colleagues, as demonstrated in the research. Similarly, there are few support teachers employed in schools. This makes it difficult to organize work with pupils with SEN and places an additional burden on teachers co-organizing education, which may affect their level of commitment.

In school practice, the main difficulties identified by teachers include: the aforementioned insufficient number of support teachers, problems with the division of responsibilities, poor professional preparation of some special educators, and the low quality of some forms of education, especially remote postgraduate studies. These problems may have a negative impact on the quality of the cooperation described.

Undoubtedly, this research does not exhaust the issue of cooperation between subject teachers and those co-organizing the education process of SEN pupils. However, they constitute an important starting point for in-depth analyses of the relations between subject teachers and those co-organizing the educational process, especially in the context of the quality of work, competences and organization of cooperation in mainstream schools. They are a contribution to the deepening of the investigations started in this area. The standard of education preparing for the teaching profession (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, 2019) imposed uniform learning outcomes for the field of special education, which made it possible to standardize the education system at different universities. Therefore, all pupils prepared on the same terms should obtain the same professional competences. Therefore, the quality of work of a teacher co-organizing the education process is determined not only by their knowledge and skills, but also by their personality competences. The tendencies described in the results and conclusions of

the presented research allow us to refer to the importance of personality competences, which determine the quality of work of a special educator. And consequently, the need to discuss the legitimacy of reinstating the personal competences of future special educators before they are admitted to studies in this field, as well as in the context of academic education, in the assumed learning outcomes in the field and specialization, to increase the emphasis on the development of the competences in question.

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