

The experiences and difficulties of teachers in working with ASD learners from various types of schools

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A teacher has an accumulation of knowledge, skills, as well as insight and provides support, which plays a critical role in student learning and achievement. My aim was to identify the characteristics of those who teach and care for students with ASDs in different types of schools. I researched teachers working with SEN students: 97 from integrative schools, 64 from mainstream schools, and 64 special school teachers. The data was collected using a questionnaire, the Two-dimensional Emotional Intelligence Inventory (DINEMO) and the Social Competence Questionnaire. The findings highlight that the majority of support and general teachers, despite less than five years of experience, declare the least difficulties in working with high-functioning children with ASDs. Special school teachers do not perceive the most difficulties in working not only with high-functioning students but also with low-functioning children affected by ASDs. The data showed that most teachers have extensive experience in working with both groups of students.

KEYWORDS: ASDs students, teachers' experience, teachers of students with SEN.

Introduction

Teachers play a vital role in students' intellectual and personal development, hence they help to prepare citizens. The achievements of pupils depend to a large extent on their personality traits, professional competences, enthusiasm and perseverance, as well as the capacity for empathy and social skills (Goleman, 2018). All these properties create the mutual relations between teachers, students, parents and the school environment. Teachers are intermediaries between a student and the world around them, they bring reality closer to the child in accordance with their needs, interests, abilities, creating situations that stimulate the student's activity, enriching experiences and encouraging skills. One of their key competences is the ability to recognise the individual needs of students, as well as impact their development on all levels, including the cognitive, emotional and social spheres.

These activities may require the special attention of teachers when working with students with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs), who are a very diverse group in terms of social,

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communication and intellectual functioning (Bowe 2004; Wilmshurst and Brue 2010). The severity of the disorder may range from very serious problems relating to avoiding eye and physical contact, lack of speech development, serious learning problems, to mild problems, which usually include difficulties with understanding and adequately responding in social situations, understanding emotions and the behaviour of other people, and literal speech understanding, e.g. jokes, metaphors, etc.

Problems with establishing and maintaining social contacts are one of the key difficulties of autism. People with ASDs may avoid eye contact with others, some of them don't like being hugged or touched. They can focus too much on objects without paying attention to other people. High-functioning people with autism or Asperger syndrome very often want to make contact with other people, but due to problems with understanding social principles, they are often perceived as strange (Jones and Frederickson 2010; Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari 2003; Vakil et al. 2009).

Children with autism usually experience delayed speech development, many of them do not develop the ability to use it at all. Some people speak but do not fully understand the meaning of the words and have difficulty talking. They also have problems in responding to voice, smiles and the expression of other people's emotions, as well as precisely understanding the statements being addressed to them. People with ASDs perceive sounds, light, images, and feel touch, smell, taste or pain differently. Sensory problems can also cause them to avoid being in a group of people. Many children with autism also play in a specific, repetitive and schematic way. High-functioning people with ASDs can show interest in specific topics, to which they often return, usually not taking into account whether the interlocutor is interested in it (Jones and Frederickson, 2010). In the teaching process, first of all, it is important to use the child's strengths. The situation of assessing the student's knowledge must be adapted to his/her communication capabilities and specificity of functioning (Lynch and Irvin, 2009; Wheeler, Mayton and Carter, 2014).

Polish law allows parents of a child with autism to choose a mainstream, integrative or special school. The possibility of using support is governed by the principles of case law for children and adolescents with autism, operated by public psychological and pedagogical counselling centres (Journal of Laws of 1991, No. 95, item 425). The three Polish educational models have different ways of accomplishing educational tasks. In the inclusive and mainstream schools attended by a child with autism, there must be a teacher employed who is trained in special education (support teacher) in addition to the general teacher. The regulation of the Ministry of National Education (2017, item 1578) guarantees the presence of additional teachers holding qualifications in special pedagogy to work exclusively with students with an autistic spectrum disorder or with multiple disabilities. Classes in special schools, depending on the pupils' degree of disability, offer smaller class sizes with only one special teacher. High-functioning learners follow the core curriculum and usually attend integrative and mainstream schools, while low-functioning students with autism more often study in special schools.

Teachers working in particular types of Polish schools have different qualifications, skills and tasks. In their work in the classroom with a student with autism, the general teacher organises the classwork together with the support teacher, as well as the methods, forms of work in classes on particular subjects, and assessment criteria (Kędzierska, 2010). The support teacher helps students meet the requirements. Therefore, he/she develops lesson strategies and uses available work methods and teaching aids. In both

mainstream and integrative schools, all students implement the core curriculum. A support teacher contributes specifically to the processes of integration between children with SEN and the school community (Kędzierska, 2010; Gajdzica, 2010). In addition to equipping students with knowledge, skills and social competences, the special teacher is intended to compensate and improve their abnormal mental and physical processes (Kauffman et al. 2019).

In each type of school, the adequacy of teachers' support, their assistance to the student with ASD with experienced educational struggles and their cooperation with the school community are indispensable elements of a successful process of acquiring knowledge and skills. It seems that a teacher with seniority, having a higher degree of professional promotion, has broader competences, and thus also greater successes in didactic and educational work (Dymon, 2007). Over the years, the teacher can acquire more experience, gain practice, develop intellectually and emotionally, and also maintain a distance to the difficulties at work, becoming a reflective and thoughtful person. On the other hand, teachers develop various personality traits with age – both favourable and unfavourable. They acquire skills, experience, distance towards certain phenomena, but also a routine, leading to schematic activities, exhausting monotony and fatigue. In such a situation, it is worth considering whether the experience gained in working with students with autism, or the lack of it, provides significant indications of the difficulties in working with this group of children and adolescents.

The Present Study

The aim of the study is to find out whether there are differences between teachers with different professional competences (general teacher, support teacher, special educator), taking into account their length of service and assessment of the difficulties in working with students with high- and low-functioning autism. In terms of the planned implementation of inclusive education, it should be asked whether teachers of various educational paths in Poland feel ready to work with each learner, including those with severer difficulties in functioning. Experience at work plays an important role in educating teachers, and it is worth asking whether it is significant in terms of coping with the difficulties in working with ASD students.

Material and Methods

The research was based on data from 225 teachers (Table 1) working with SEN students: 97 (44%) from integrative schools, 64 (28%) from mainstream schools, 64 (28%) from special schools (those with ID and autism), $\chi^2(2) = 9,680$; $p < 0.01$. By type of teacher, the respondents included: 130 (58%) general teachers, 62 (27%) support teachers and 33 (15%) special teachers, $\chi^2(2) = 66,107$; $p < 0.001$. The research groups do not differ by gender, age and education. The length of professional service ($\chi^2(6) = 14.618$; $p < 0.05$) is significantly differentiated by type of teacher. Among general teachers (50%), people with over 15 years of experience predominate, while among support teachers (30%) – people with over 5 years of experience. The latter also includes a large group of people with less than 5 years of experience in working with SEN students (26%). A detailed division is provided in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 1
Division of the respondents by type of teacher and type of work (N = 225)

	General	Teacher			Total
		Support	Special		
School	Special	31	0	33	64
	Integrative	52	45	0	97
	Mainstream	47	17	0	64
Total		130	62	33	225

Table 2
Descriptive characteristics of the teachers from the compared schools (N = 225).

School	Special	Integrative	Mainstream	
Gender ^a				
Female	56 (87.5)	82 (85.4)	56 (87.5)	$\chi^2(2) = 0.205, p = .902$
Male	8 (12.5)	14 (14.6)	8 (12.5)	
Age ^a				
up to 30	8 (12.5)	14 (16.4)	15 (23.4)	$\chi^2(6) = 9.907, p = .129$
from 30 to 40	22 (34.4)	33 (34.5)	24 (37.5)	
from 40 to 50	23 (35.9)	26 (27.1)	9 (14.1)	
over 50	11 (17.2)	23 (24.0)	16 (25.0)	
Education ^a				
bachelor's degree	-	1 (1.0)	-	$\chi^2(4) = 2.650, p = .618$
master's degree	63 (98.4)	93 (96.9)	64 (100)	
doctorate	1 (1.6)	2 (2.1)	-	
Length of professional service ^a				
less than 5 years	4 (6.2)	20 (20.8)	13 (20.3)	$\chi^2(6) = 9.587, p = .143$
more than 5 years	12 (18.8)	22 (22.9)	16 (25.0)	
more than 10 years	16 (25.0)	16 (16.7)	10 (15.6)	
more than 15 years	32 (50.0)	38 (39.6)	24 (35.7)	

^aActual figures provided (% in parentheses)

Table 3
Descriptive characteristics of the compared groups of teachers (N = 225).

Teacher	General	Support	Special	
Gender ^a				
Female	109 (83.8)	56 (91.8)	29 (87.9)	$\chi^2(2) = 2.320, p = .313$
Male	21 (16.2)	5 (8.2)	4 (12.1)	
Age ^a				
up to 30	17 (13.1)	13 (21.3)	7 (21.2)	$\chi^2(6) = 5.430, p = .490$
from 30 to 40	44 (33.8)	23 (37.7)	12 (36.4)	
from 40 to 50	34 (26.2)	15 (24.6)	9 (27.3)	
over 50	35 (26.9)	10 (16.4)	5 (15.1)	
Education ^a				
bachelor's degree	-	1 (1.6)	-	$\chi^2(4) = 4.328, p = .375$
master's degree	128 (98.5)	60 (98.4)	32 (97.0)	
doctorate	2 (1.5)	-	1 (3.0)	
Length of professional service ^a				
less than 5 years	18 (13.8)	16 (26.2)	3 (9.1)	$\chi^2(6) = 14.618, p < .05$
more than 5 years	24 (18.4)	18 (29.5)	8 (24.2)	
more than 10 years	22 (16.8)	11 (18.1)	9 (27.3)	
more than 15 years	65 (50.0)	16 (26.2)	13 (39.4)	

^aActual figures provided (% in parentheses)

The data was collected using a questionnaire aimed at obtaining information on the difficulties faced by the respondents from the three types of schools. The opinions of teachers with different experiences in working with ASD students were collected.

Results

Length of service in working with children with ASDs

The analysis on the length of professional service and difficulties encountered in working with ASD students was conducted with a division into the type of school and type of

teacher separately, using the non-parametric chi-square test. Below are the results for those groups of teachers in which there were statistically significant differences.

The collected data show that the length of experience in working with high-functioning children with ASDs (Figure 1) differs significantly only due to the place of work ($\chi^2 (8) = 20.969$; $p < .01$). It turns out that the highest percentage of employees of mainstream schools (42%) and integrative schools (31%) have up to five years of experience in working with this group of children. In the case of the latter group of teachers, slightly less (29%) have over 10 years of experience in such work. However, among the special school teachers, the respondents most frequently indicated that they have more than 5 years (28%) and up to 5 years (25%) of work experience.

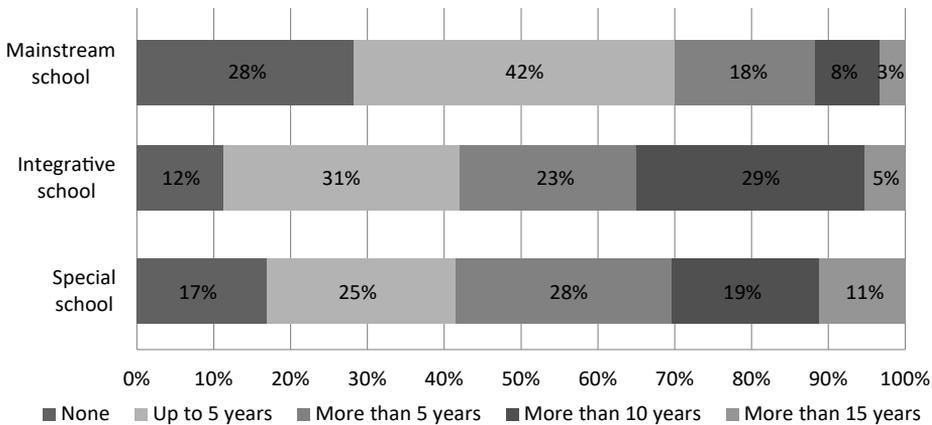


Figure 1. Length of professional service of teachers working with high-functioning students with ASDs by type of school.

In the case of working with low-functioning students with ASDs, the results showed statistically significant differences in the professional experience of the teachers due to their place of work ($\chi^2 (8) = 41.448$; $p < .001$) as well as type of teacher ($\chi^2 (8) = 31.328$; $p < .001$). It turned out (Figure 2) that the majority of teachers in mainstream (66%) and integrative (42%) schools have no experience in working with such students. Every fifth mainstream school teacher (23%) has up to 5 years of experience. Whereas among teachers of integrative schools, there is a similar percentage of those with up to 5 years (17%), over 5 years (18%) and over 10 years (18%) of experience in working with low-functioning pupils with ASDs. However, teachers from special schools had the lowest percentage of people (14%) who have no experience at all in working with this group of children. The same percentage have over 15 years of experience in such work. Among the respondents from this type of school, there are people with over 5 years of experience (28%). Fewer teachers (23%) have over 10 years of experience in such work.

It turned out that the division of the respondents by type of teacher (Figure 3) showed that there are no special teachers without any experience in working with low-functioning ASD students. The largest percentage of them have more than 5 years of experience in such work. On the other hand, the division between general subject teachers and support teachers is similar due to their experience in working with this group of students. Most

often they do not have any experience in such work. Teachers with such experience usually do not exceed 5 years of work with low-functioning ASD students.

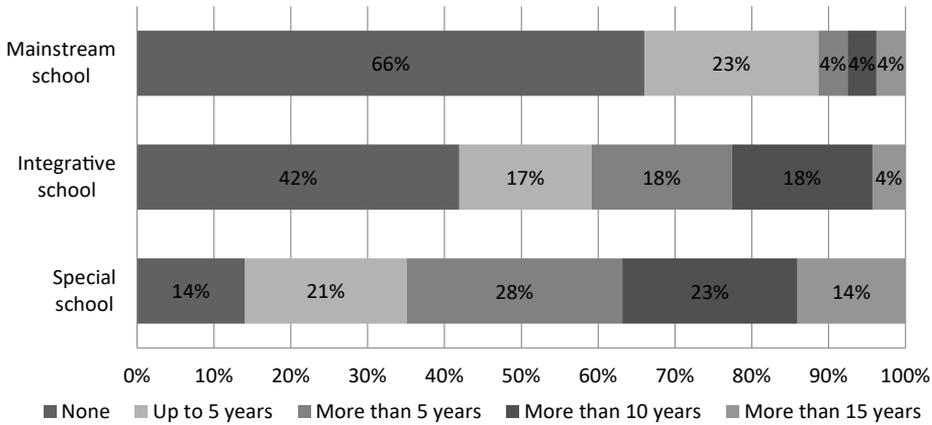


Figure 2. Length of professional service of teachers working with low-functioning students with ASDs by type of school.

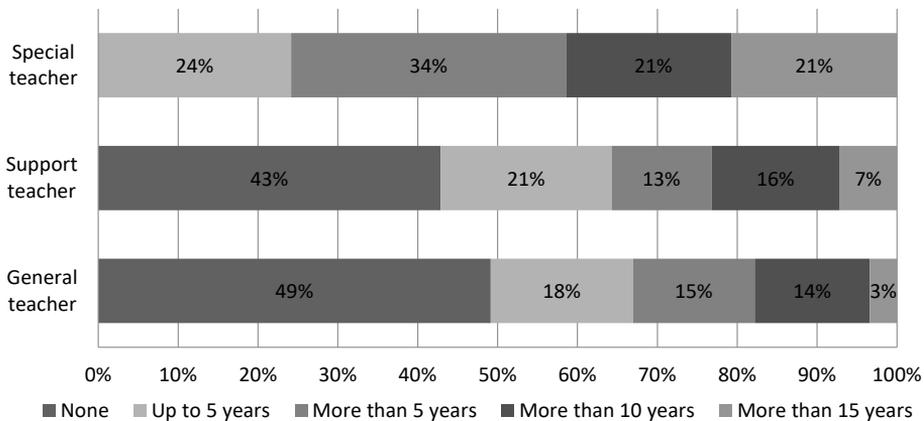


Figure 3. Length of professional service of teachers working with high-functioning students with ASDs by group of teachers.

Difficulties in working with children with ASD's

The results showed that experiencing difficulties in working with high-functioning children with ASDs (Figure 4) significantly differentiates respondents only by type of teacher ($\chi^2(8) = 26.968; p < 0.001$). Regardless of the nature of their work, the overwhelming majority of teachers declared that working with this group of students causes at most average difficulties. Even more so, the majority of support teachers (66%) admit that working

with children with this type of SEN is the least difficult for them. Every third teacher of general (30%) and special education (28%) provided a similar answer.

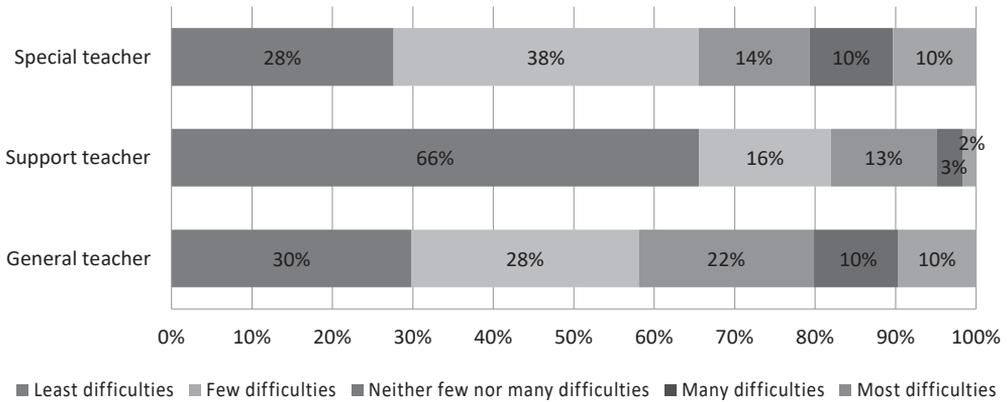


Figure 4. Difficulties in working with high-functioning students with ASDs by group of teachers.

It turned out that experiencing difficulties in working with low-functioning children with ASDs (Figure 5) also differs significantly among the respondents solely due to type of teacher ($\chi^2(8) = 18.097; p < 0.05$). The general subject teachers admit far more frequently (32%) than others that working with this group of students is the most difficult for them. This is also the group which least often (16%) indicated that such work is associated with experiencing minimal difficulties. However, every third (30%) support teacher declared that working with children with this type of SEN is associated with experiencing the least difficulties. In the group of special teachers, the most frequently indicated answer (40%) was of experiencing neither few nor many difficulties with the discussed group of students.

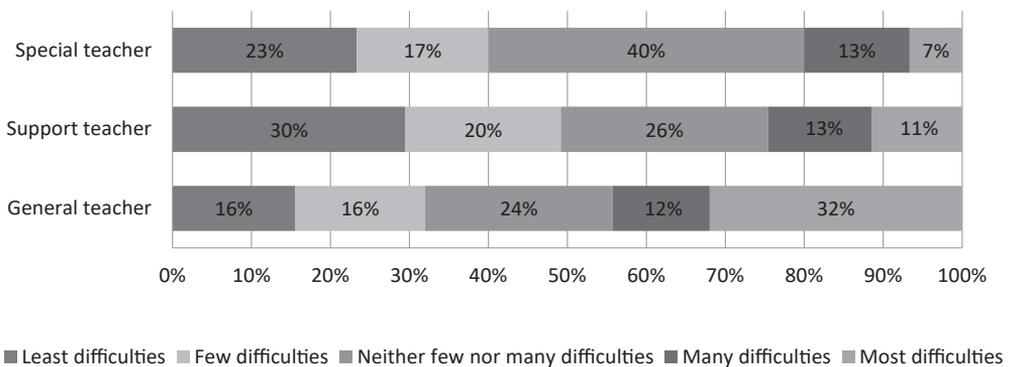


Figure 5. Difficulties in working with low-functioning students with ASDs by group of teachers.

Discussion

The turn of 1989 to 1990 was marked by political transformations in this area of education, entailing organisational changes which played a significant role in changing public perception and awareness. Proposals for an integrative education system (Hulek 1988) were being implemented, leading to a breakthrough in a system based on a clear division between special and mainstream schools. Students with disabilities were beginning to appear in the latter, now following an open, non-discriminatory model. The Act of 8 January 1999 on the change in the education system (Journal of Laws no.12, item 96), which brought the 1991 education reform into force, guaranteed all school-age children, regardless of the type and degree of disability and challenges in functioning, the right to an education not only in special schools, but also in mainstream and integrative schools. In a historical perspective, educating learners with disabilities, including ones with autism, in special schools has a long tradition, and working with students in an inclusive approach is still challenging.

The analysis of the obtained results of the experiences among teachers from different types of schools in working with students with autism showed that the majority of mainstream and integrative school teachers have worked for less than 5 years with high-functioning ASD students. However, in the group of teachers from special schools, some of them have taught for more than 5 years. The largest group of teachers with no experience in working with low-functioning autistic students are those from mainstream and integrative schools. In contrast, special school teachers have extensive experience in working with students with complex disorders in central nervous system development and functioning.

The obtained results showed that the studied teachers generally do not have major problems in working with high-functioning children with ASDs, regardless of the difficulties that may be caused by teaching a person who experiences qualitative abnormalities in social interaction, communication patterns as well as having a limited and stereotypical repertoire of interests and activities (Lewis, Wheeler, Carter, 2017). Opinions about the experienced difficulties differ significantly among the respondents only by type of teacher. Regardless of the nature of the activities undertaken, working with this group causes only average difficulties for all teachers. Even more so, most support teachers admit that working with high-functioning children with ASDs causes the least difficulties. The support teachers, both in integrative and mainstream schools, are responsible for assisting a student during classwork. Integrative schools are most often attended by students with Asperger syndrome or autism without speech delays or cognitive impairments.

The situation is different in the case of respondents' declarations about working with low-functioning ASD children, who, in addition to complex disorders of central nervous system development and functioning, often experience impairments of speech and cognitive development (Pierangelo, Giuliani, 2012). General teachers more often than other teachers indicated that working with this group of students is the most difficult for them. Among support teachers, every third declared that working with such students involves the least difficulties, and the group of special teachers pointed to experiencing average difficulties while undertaking educational activities with such students. Perhaps the reason for this is that teachers are aware of the educational requirements for the students attending their schools, who are expected to complete the core curriculum intended for their level of education.

Therefore, the obtained results show that the majority of support and general teachers, despite having less than five years of experience, declare the least difficulties in working with

high-functioning children with ASDs. In the case of general teachers, it can be assumed that the only reason for indicating many difficulties at work is their lack of experience. The situation differs in the case of special teachers, who do not perceive having the most difficulties in working with high-functioning or low-functioning students with ASDs. The data showed that most of them have extensive experience in working with both groups of students.

The obtained results are interesting in the context of the change of thinking towards inclusive education, which meets the broadly understood needs of all students (Armstrong, Armstrong, Spandagou 2011; Farrell 2010) and is to eliminate the barriers inherent in the negative attitudes of teachers. The organisation of education, including the requirement of integrative and mainstream schools to implement the core curriculum, significantly limits the possibility of students with severer disabilities to attend them. Therefore, teachers from these schools have less opportunity to gain experience in working with ASD students, and thus declare many difficulties at work. The obtained data seem to confirm that thinking of a “school for all” where some teachers can accept the presence of students with SEN in their class, but those with a mild degree of disability and on condition that there are organisational changes in the school (Smith Myles, Simpson 1992).

Conclusions

The obtained results show that teachers who had more experience and appropriate professional preparation experienced fewer difficulties in working with low- and high-functioning students with autism. Some teachers indicated difficulties at work, but as it turned out, they had no work experience yet with such students. It seems that the opportunity to gain experience at the stage of university education could prepare future teachers for working more effectively with SEN children, and also the ones with autism. It is worth asking whether the new educational standards (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1450) preparing people for the teaching profession will equip teachers with competences in effective classroom management and modelling behaviour for all learners, also those with autism. The new programme preparing Polish teachers to work with SEN students includes shaping such competences in its assumptions. It would be worth conducting a future study to check the effects of implementing these new standards in teacher education.

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