

Non-pedagogical School personnel as Agents in the Functional Assessment of Students with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT:

Functional assessment, as opposed to classical psycho-pedagogical diagnosis, has been playing a significant role in the new model of inclusive education in Poland, launched by the Ministry of Education in 2020. It is a multispecialty process of collecting data about the child or youth's functioning in order to design an adequate support plan in the ecological niche of the young person's school. While the specialist role is well described in this process, subject teachers' and parents' roles are still being discussed. Little is known about the possibility of playing an active role in this process by the school's non-pedagogical personnel. The paper aims to explore this role, which was done in a focus group research. The results are promising: they show a high level of non-pedagogical personnel observation awareness of the children's functioning and their readiness to learn more about the nature of children's needs and play a more active role in the functional assessment process.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was ignited by many conversations and meetings, but one of them was crucial. Anna is a young psychologist who is really devoted to her job. She runs her diagnostic office with immense care and is ready to support every child and their parents, asking for counseling. Last week, she was to diagnose a 9-year-old Romek. His teachers described him as a problematic student with significant cognitive delays and problematic behavior fits. His reading and writing difficulties seriously impeded his schoolwork in every single school subject. His family was uninterested in their sixth child's school conduct and did not collaborate with the school teachers and advisors. Anna, as usual, conducted numerous tests and analyses in her office, and Romek visited her twice. In the end, she did many statistical calculations, checked the norms, and shared with me the results. Disappointedly, she announced, "*You know what – unfortunately, Romek is not intellectually disabled!*"

The critical element in supporting students with disabilities and special educational needs is an adequate assessment of their needs and developmental and educational possibilities. Psycho-pedagogical assessment/diagnosis might be conducted using different models. The two foremost are the differentiation or the "desk" model and the functional assessment model (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2022). The first one might be regarded as a classical psycho-pedagogical assessment: the child is invited to the diagnostic and counseling center, and the child's problems are diagnosed and described with normalized and standardized tests. The final element of this process is a kind of certificate that names the child's deficits and their entitlement to specific forms of support. The second model, a functional assessment model, has an opposite procedure and aims. Its aim is not so much to provide a name for children's challenges (like "dyslexia" or "intellectual disability") but to recognize the children's needs as well as possible. The procedure, consequently, takes place not in the external diagnostic center but mainly at the child's school, their natural ecological niche (Knopik & Domagała-Zyśk 2020).

Anna did her best to conduct classical psycho-pedagogical diagnoses typical of Poland and other Central European countries. However, her belief in standardized tests and culturally normalized tools somehow overshadowed a real child with his needs. Having or not the certificate of intellectual disability – Romek's difficulties are the same. Several (and sometimes one or two) points in the intelligence tests should not be the criterion for the support to be given – or withdrawn.

This paper aims to present the main principles of the new model of functional assessment that was introduced in Poland. It explains the significance of its ecological procedure and the need for numerous agents, especially non-pedagogical school staff, to be involved in this process.

SCHOOL FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT MODEL AS A BASIS FOR ADEQUATE SUPPORT

As mentioned, nowadays in Poland, the right to support depends strongly on the certificate of disability or certificate of special educational needs. They are granted after a meticulous diagnostic procedure in diagnostic and counseling centers that work outside schools. With a growing number of children and youths experiencing different developmental and education problems and difficulties, it is usually necessary to wait in a queue for as long as 4-6 months for the procedure to be completed. While waiting for the certificate, the child has limited possibilities to get psycho-pedagogical support, as some forms of it are reserved only for these children who were granted this certificate.

It is clearly visible that this situation needs to be changed, and for the last couple of years, many institutions have made efforts to change the situation. A new "Inclusive Education for All" model was launched by the Polish Ministry of Education (MEiN, 2020), which promotes fully inclusive school education for every child, including children with disabilities and special needs. One of the principles is organizing the needs assessment process and designing the support plans for children at schools, not in external diagnostic and counseling centers. Hopefully, this will allow for a more accurate assessment and immediate support procedures.

The Polish functional assessment model has already been described in numerous publications (Domagała-Zyśk et al. 2022; Otrębski et al., 2022; Domagała-Zyśk & Knopik, 2020), with the term *functional diagnosis* tending to be used in the early works (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2017). Currently, the recommended term is *functional assessment* (Knopik & Domagała-Zyśk, 2021, p. 51). It is understood as a multidimensional process of recognizing and describing

- person's functioning in the everyday environment, their strengths and problem behavior, needs and developmental possibilities, including the description and identification of the sources of presented behavior;
- the possibility of a person's integral and sustainable development, both in terms of updating their devel-

opmental potential and the extent of modification of the environment in which they live and learn.

Functional assessment is based on the idea of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health, in which integral, holistic assessment is promoted in case of any problematic situation. In practice, if a child is advised to undertake psycho-pedagogical assessment because of their reading and writing difficulties, the functional analysis focuses not only on reading and writing skills – or lack of them, but on several spheres of a person's functioning, like general tasks, communication, relationships, roles, and duties, etc. All of them might help assess the person's activities and participation in everyday situations, performing their life roles – not only the role of a student.

Functional assessment needs functional observation skills. They are usually exercised during teacher training classes but might also be possessed by persons who have not graduated from a university. They are sometimes a kind of innate talents – but can also be consciously learned. The principles of functional observation can be formulated based on principles for functional assessment (Knopik & Domagała-Zyśk, 2021; Domagała-Zyśk, 2023):

Principle 1. Functional observation considers the description and analysis of a person's functioning in every dimension: physical, cognitive, social-emotional, moral-spiritual, and linguistic.

Principle 2. In functional observation, both the difficulties and resources of the person are taken into account.

Principle 3. In functional observation, we describe the student's behavior and the function it has for the person being evaluated, their relatives, and the teachers and professionals working with them.

Principle 4. Functional observation is a multi-stage and multidisciplinary process of data collection and analysis, involving various specialists in education, but also other adults who can observe students (especially parents and non-pedagogical school personnel)

Principle 5. Functional observation is multi-contextual - in the process, we use multiple sources of information from the student whose needs are being assessed, from his family environment, the comprehensive school environment (teachers, other professionals, and personnel), and his peers.

Functional assessment is the opposite of “desk diagnosis” or “criterion diagnosis”. For such static and „one-time” diagnostic sessions, the child is invited to the specialist's office. The specialist, based on tests and questionnaires, as well as a conversation and observation of

the child's behavior while performing cognitive diagnostic tasks, prepares an opinion or judgment on the type and extent of their difficulties and developmental and educational needs. This type of diagnosis is necessary in some situations, such as when it is obligatory to accurately determine the type of reading and writing difficulties or the specifics of the student's cognitive functioning. However, it is insufficient to assess the overall functioning of the student and the possibility of supporting their development. This is because adequate assessment is possible only in the students' ecological niche - the natural, everyday environment where they spend many hours daily. It is there (at home, at school, at extracurricular educational centers) that students exercise relationships with others, learn ways to cope with difficulties, and express their motivation to take - or not take - specific actions. Assessment conducted in the ecological natural environment of a student's life is not a static, short, one-time event but a dynamic process of noticing specific behaviors - implementing interventions - and evaluating the effectiveness of the changes made, which is also done in the process of observation.

In educational functional assessment (this one which is performed in the context of a student's education), two stages are proposed (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2022):

1. The school stage - the so-called school functional assessment, which is of a screening nature - if a problematic situation is reported by the child, parent, or teacher at any time during education, or of a monitoring nature - if the student participates in the functional assessment process, not for the first time. In the second case, the school's functional assessment should be monitored.
2. The in-depth assessment stage is usually carried out in a psychological-educational clinic or other specialized institution, the purpose of which is a thorough, multi-specialist discernment of the student's situation.

As mentioned above, the process of data collection about students' functioning is a complex task involving various agents, such as teachers. School chancellors and also parents. Though they are usually not professionally involved in education, they are regarded as an indispensable source of information about the child's functioning and also about designing the individualized support plan. Amilkiewicz-Marek in her latest research (2023) asked teachers, teacher training students, and special educators (N=109) working at school to what extent they consider parents as reliable partners in the functional assessment procedure. The research results revealed that teachers and

future teachers often regard parents of students with SEN as active participants in the applicable assessment process and co-organizers of optimal school environments for their children. More than 80 (73%) of respondents regarded parents as essential agents in the process of their children's needs analysis, and more than 23% (26 persons) suggested that parents must take part in formulating educational goals and designing rational adjustments and modifications for the students.

When it comes to designing the support plan, almost half of the participants (53, 48,62%) suggested parents can support teachers and notable pedagogues in developing proper strategies for managing challenging behavior, and 51 (46,79%) - in designing additional classes and activities to support child's development. Almost half of the respondents (49 - 44,95%) suggest parents can help them develop motivational strategies and 30 (22,75%) - advice on using appropriate technological tools for education and communication, 28 (25,69%) - see parents as partners in reflecting on the regular lessons and activities, 25 (22,93%) - admits they play important role in building class positive climate and 22 (20,18%) - see their essential role in overall organization of teaching and learning process.

Thus, the functional assessment process might involve professional input from school pedagogical personnel and information and recommendations gathered from non-professional agents – children's parents. Extending this group of informants for school non-pedagogical personnel also seems advisable.

NON-PEDAGOGICAL SCHOOL PERSONNEL ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE IN THE FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

Several adult persons take care of the single child and youth at school: teachers, supportive teachers, teacher assistants, school counselors, psychologists, social workers, etc. The school's non-pedagogical personnel, like cleaning personnel, teacher's aides, janitors, reception workers, secretary officers, computer maintenance workers, and school bus drivers – are usually not regarded as those who might play a role in assessing students' additional needs.

There is a tiny but significant body of research concerning this topic. When mentioning the most "sensitive" spaces at school, school toilets, changing rooms/lockers' area, and school buses are named. These spaces are rarely visited by teachers and the adults responsible for supervising them – they are usually unaware of the student's special needs. In a study by deLara (2008, p.

62) conducted among 30 school bus drivers in the US, they concluded that though bus drivers are in a unique position to inform the discussion on aggressive behavior during the school day, they are rarely polled to express an opinion or contribute to school safety. King, Kennedy, and Powelson (2019) analyzed 18 studies on behavioral interventions and improving the safety of school buses. The authors conclude that the studies did not answer research questions about the nature of children's behavior on the school buses, the types and scope of the drivers' interventions, and measures taken to improve safety on-board. The authors advocate for more research on that topic and new measures for diminishing the scope of bullying and risky behavior in these undersupervised spaces.

Similar conclusions might be excerpted from research on safety and challenging behaviors of students in the school toilets. As researchers Slater, Jones, and Procter noticed (2019), they are pretty often spaces of bullying, anxiety, and risky behavior.

Identifying research on the pedagogical roles of other non-pedagogical staff in the school community was impossible. There are only some short mentions of their work, especially regarding immigration and language issues (Gonçalves & Schluter 2016).

NON-PEDAGOGICAL PERSONNEL ROLE IN THE FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT – PILOT RESEARCH RESULTS

In order to register the understanding and experiences of non-pedagogical staff as possible participants in the functional assessment process, a focus group interview (FGI) has been conducted. Focus group interviews are defined as group interviews on a given topic conducted by a moderator (Merton et al., 1990). Significant differences exist between a series of individual interviews and an FGI; the latter might lead to results that may not appear in individual conversations, and vice versa. In the presented pilot research, the use of FGI was justified by the nature of the study, which included sharing common experiences. A synergy effect can be observed in such cases, as one person's story evokes other stories (Lisek-Michalska, 2013).

The KUL Ethics Committee approved the procedure, and the participants gave their informed consent to participate in the interview. The meeting took place in August 2023, lasted for 90 minutes, and involved 12 staff members (10 women and two men) working in local kindergartens (4 persons) and primary schools (6 persons) as cleaning staff, janitors, maintenance workers, teacher's

aide, and school office workers. The respondents were invited based on one criterion: they have been working in a mainstream school where students with disabilities and special educational needs are enrolled.

During the focus Interview, they were asked the following questions: 1) My observations: You can observe the children/pupils in numerous everyday situations. Can you share examples that you think include some observations important for the child's general educational characteristics?; 2) Children /Students with diverse needs: Have you noticed in the kindergarten/school children/pupils with any kind of special/educational/developmental needs? Can you share some observations about their everyday routines at your institutions? Do you have any observations of them that you took in the locker rooms, during the break, or when they were waiting for the classes to start?; 3) Collaboration: Do you feel your observations might be necessary for the children/pupils' teachers or parents? Have you had any opportunity to share your observations with them?; 4) Competences: Do you consider yourself as a person responsible for the children/pupils' well-being and education? Do you think you have any instruments to support them?

After the interview, the participants were offered a workshop on the developmental and educational needs of children and youths with disabilities and special educational needs.

Analysis of the themes from the interview showed four dominant topics: 1) The non-pedagogical school personnel is confident they can describe children's behavior precisely as they observe the students in numerous everyday situations; 2) They do not feel like being responsible or involved in pedagogical programs in their institution; 3) They reported examples of significant personal relationship with the students; 4) The staff admitted their lack of knowledge of the nature of children special needs and expressed their wish to learn more about them.

I am observing the children all the time ...

As predicted, the school staff were able to give numerous examples of students' behavior that might be important in the procedure of functional assessment. They presented themselves as knowing the school community well. They are also deeply involved in the local community and can speak about the children's life outside school, knowing their parents and distant family members or being their neighbors. While doing their duties before the classes, they notice not only students' presence but also their mood, changes of behavior for some days, fears, and relationships – or lack of them:

I know her very well as she is my cousin's wife's niece. I see her every day near the lockers. She does not speak with anybody, and she does not even look at other children. She quickly changes her shoes and goes straight to the classroom, never talking to anybody. (a cleaning lady 1).

This girl is obscene. She never says good morning, and even if she sees the floor has just been cleaned, she walks there in her dirty shoes. Once I told her not to do so – she shouted that it was my job to clean the floor. I told the teacher about this situation, but I do not think they expose children to be nice to us. (a cleaning lady 2)

... but nobody is interested in what I have seen.

As school personnel, they report to the teachers only the most apparent behaviors, like open aggression or breaking the school rules (e.g., not changing their winter shoes for sneakers). Even if they notice something more subtle, they are not entitled to speak to the teachers about their pedagogical observations. They are not allowed to comment on the student's behavior (some even reported being shouted at by the students if they tried to comment on their behavior – this was approved by the children's parents who commented: “*you are not a teacher, you should not speak to my child.*” However, their pedagogical functional observations might be crucial to understanding the child's behavior:

When I am cleaning the bathrooms, the children go in or out. I see many times and hear many times as they are making fun of that boy (with autism). This boy later on becomes uneasy, depressed, and sometimes aggressive – I can see that. I even told the boys once or twice to stop it and asked them if they were not ashamed of their behavior, but they did not listen to us – we are not teachers.

“Non-pedagogical” (?) pedagogical interventions

Everyday duties like cleaning, watering the plants, and grass-cutting seem safe, home-like activities for many students and appeal to them. Some students like this type of activity, and they are not cognitively demanding but can be good at it. For some of them, school personnel might serve as role models for future career choices. This makes some children attached to school non-pedagogical personnel, which not only allows for better recognition of their needs but also secures some spaces for skill development:

There is a boy in our school in the 7th grade. He had a car accident last year, and since then, he has been having severe problems walking. When his peers were playing football, he stood alone near the field. I am usually there, cutting the grass or collecting rubbish. One day, I spoke a bit to him, just

about nothing. Since then, our specific “friendship” started – he says good morning every time he sees me and sometimes helps me in my work. It is better for him to do so than to do nothing and be alone. I have a little problem with my leg, too, so perhaps he feels secure as we have something in common (a maintenance worker 1)

When I work in the afternoon, this girl leaves the classroom where they have extracurricular activities and stays with me. She is allowed by her teacher to do so. So I am cleaning the floors, and we talk for hours and hours. I understand her native language – as she is an immigrant and we come from the same country. She is such a talkative girl! And I am there to listen; I do like it. And she definitely needs somebody to listen to her. (a cleaning lady 3)

I want to know more to support better

School inclusion in our country is not a plan – it is a fact: according to the Educational Statistical Office (2022), more than 67% of students with disabilities and special needs learn in mainstream schools, and only 33% attend special schools. This means that every regular school has students with diverse disabilities and special needs. Numerous courses and workshops within the Teacher Professional Development program are offered to the subject teacher and school pedagogical specialists. However, it very rarely happens that such seminars are provided to the non-pedagogical school personnel:

Well, I do not know anything about autism. Nobody tells us what are the children's problems. We are not teachers. (cleaning lady 1)

You know I work just in the office, but the children come to me to ask for some documents when they lose their school identity cards or keys to the lockers. First of all, I knew nothing about autism. Now, I've seen some materials on the Internet, and when I see Kuba or Maciek – I suppose they might have autism. Nobody tells me that because I am not entitled to it. But they behave just like the boys in the films. In these films, they told how to speak to people with autism, so now I understand their behavior better, and I am not afraid when they come in, flattering their hands and repeating things many times or when they ask me to call their parents. (a secretary officer)

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to discuss the multi-agent nature of the functional assessment procedure as introduced into Polish schools. This is regarded as a model for recognizing the students' needs properly and answering them in an adequate and timely manner, without waiting too long for a specialist formal diagnosis. While psycho-pedagogical school counselors are the leading specialists responsible for school diagnostic duties, subject teachers' and other pedagogical specialists' roles are well understood. The active role of parents has been effectively advocated in formal and informal discourse and is also confirmed in research. However, there is insufficient research to support including non-pedagogical school personnel as active agents in this procedure. The pilot research presented in this paper shows both the high level of awareness of the non-pedagogical personnel and their readiness to be more actively involved in the children's needs assessment process, which might be beneficial for learning more about the nature of students' challenges and the shape of the support plan.

Non-pedagogical personnel can also play an active and essential role in exercising the support plan: their role in building an atmosphere of security, emotional warmth, and a solid climate at school is prominent. Still, it needs to be recognized in a more detailed way.

Future research is strongly recommended in this field. This allows for the inclusion of even more engaged adults into teams responsible for supporting children with special needs and disabilities. The pilot research also shows the need for specialized workshops for this group of school personnel which not only supports the children, but also enhances their work satisfaction and the school-inclusive climate in general.

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