

Scope of Co-Teachers' Tasks in Polish Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT:

The co-teacher plays a crucial role in supporting students with special educational needs in an inclusive class. Despite interest in this role, few studies have considered their tasks in detail. To the author's knowledge, this topic has never been investigated from the perspective of Polish primary school teachers. Therefore, the research questions posed in this study relate to the scope and frequency of tasks performed by a co-teacher in an elementary school and their correlation with the teacher's seniority, professional rank, and qualification in special education. The survey was conducted online between April 2021 and December 2023 using the Forms platform. A total of 200 questionnaires were subject to analysis. The results show that the teachers with higher rankings and a higher level of professionalism were more likely to perform more complex tasks. However, there are still areas they need to work on while co-teaching. These include the use of diagnostic tools and their development. Novice teachers need to develop more complex cooperative-consultative tasks.

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INTRODUCTION

The rights of students with special educational needs to learn with their peers in their local communities are clearly articulated in binding international documents (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2018), which also indicate that the educational policies of individual countries, including Poland, will align with their legal requirements. Reports by the European Agency that analyze these issues show that educational laws in many European countries are moving toward implementing solutions to meet these requirements (Ebersold, 2016; Ebersold et al., 2019; Kefallinou et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that students included in mainstream schools should not be deprived of specialized support. For children with special educational needs and disabilities to fulfill their rights to effective, inclusive education requires the provision of assistance from specialists. This need is indicated by the reports of the European Agency (Ebersold, 2016; Ebersold et al., 2019) and by the results of several research projects undertaken in recent years (Anaby et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020).

In terms of providing specialized support, several solutions have been implemented at the school level (e.g., a team of teachers and specialists, SENCO) and the classroom level (differentiated teaching, co-teaching approach). Special education teacher support is one of the primary approaches to providing specialized assistance to students at the classroom level. This solution exists in many countries (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Sweden, Greece, Ireland, Germany, Norway), including Poland (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020; Eurydice, 2023). Implementation must be continuously monitored, especially given the wide range of tasks assigned to the special education teacher.

Recent research has mainly focused on implementing co-teaching and factors facilitating and hindering collaboration (Lubin & Fernal, 2022; Rafferty, 2021). There is a lack of current research findings on how to implement the tasks a support teacher must do and the actual implementation and prioritization of individual tasks. This is particularly important for identifying those dimensions that require more attention on the part of the support teacher or the implementation in which s/he requires more support. No research has been published on the scope of tasks assigned to a support teacher in Poland. Only students' opinions were studied, while teachers' views were not expressed or recorded (Szumski, 2022).

There is a tendency in some countries to replace the support teacher's work with non-teaching staff or to leave the running of an inclusive classroom to the teacher alone (UNESCO, 2020; Webster & de Boer, 2021). This trend indicates the need to demonstrate the usefulness of the support teacher by outlining the wide range of tasks they perform. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the whole range of tasks assigned to the support teacher, including those tasks that do not directly result from cooperation with the classroom teacher in the conduct of lessons. This will demonstrate the need for his/her presence in an inclusive classroom. Such studies are few and do not include a complete detailed list of the co-teacher's numerous tasks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various models are being adopted to support students with special educational needs in inclusive education in several countries. Anaby et al. (2019) reviewed them systematically, pointing out that they assume the collaboration of various partners, knowledge sharing, and joint classroom management. Within these models, support is provided at a variety of levels, usually determined by systems based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017), which involves assisting in the immediate natural environment, such as the school classroom (Anaby et al., 2019). An essential role in this system is played by the support teacher, a team member who supports a student with special educational needs and cooperates with the teacher of an inclusive class. Diagnostic, educational-therapeutic, consultative, and cooperative tasks have different dimensions in different educational systems. This depends on several factors identified below.

According to Göransson et al. (2019), the role of the special education teacher in an inclusive education system is defined to a greater or lesser extent by the educational system accepted by the given educational authorities. Special educators have limited professional control over the way their role is conducted. Accountability requirements and legal regulations may include incompatible goals, such as inclusive education and an emphasis on performance and achievement (Göransson et al., 2019). A way to make the legal definition of this role more flexible is to introduce, as is the case in Sweden, the principle of organizational professionalization. The way a role is performed is determined within a professional group by collegial authority and is characterized by professional discretion and control over the

definition of the work performed within the profession (Göransson et al., 2019). The teacher's subjectivity is essential in creating his or her role, consequently determining the effectiveness of inclusive education. The results of a recent international study indicated that it is precisely collaboration that explains how teacher subjectivity and shared agency promote inclusive education.

The degree of management by external forms of regulation, accountability requirements, goal setting and achievement, targets, etc., varies depending on the part of the education system affected, including the type of school and level of education (Parding & Liljegen, 2017; Göransson et al., 2019). For example, there are differences in the organization of support implemented in public and private schools in Sweden. In non-public schools with fewer students with disabilities, special educators are more likely to be employed part-time and hold other positions in schools (such as the principal) than in public schools (Magnússon et al., 2018). These schools have more flexibility in defining their role and tasks (Göransson et al., 2013).

The scope and manner of professional tasks assigned to the role of special educator also depend on the teacher's seniority, the degree of education and preparation for specific roles, and the expectations of the school environment (Griffin et al., 2009; Klang et al., 2017). Novice special educators spend much time preparing the program and teaching aids, especially if they work with several teachers on different subjects (Griffin et al., 2009). Special educators are expected to have greater influence than the class teachers on the scope of content implemented with students with disabilities (Lindqvist et al., 2011). Special educators with a degree in special education are more likely to see their role as implementing inclusive practices, while teachers with only additional training in special education are more likely to see their role as primarily supporting the students' work (Göransson et al., 2016). Special educators are more likely to perform tasks such as counseling, developmental support, and teaching children/students individually or in groups for which they feel well prepared (Göransson et al., 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018).

In contrast, regardless of their preparation, there are tasks (e.g., school development work) which they rarely perform in their daily work (Göransson et al., 2015). The way in which they perform the role (reactive or proactive) also depends on the expectations of the environment, determining the scope of their responsibilities, power status, and priorities, and the time allocated to coordinate

tasks (Emanuelsson, 2001). Research suggests that the expectations of the environment often refer to the supportive role of the special education teacher in contrast to the dominant role of the mainstream classroom teacher (Beamish et al., 2006; Rice & Zigmund, 2000).

The literature also describes the broader and narrower categories of tasks a support teacher performs. Mihajlovic (2020) lists three general categories: individual teaching /teaching in a small group, collaboration with teachers and multiprofessional group, and 'background work' (pedagogical documents, IEP). The study by Paloniemi et al. (2023) identifies a list of tasks most commonly performed by co-teachers. Consultative collaboration with teachers, co-teaching, developing grades or school-wide practices for student well-being, collaborating with students' parents, working with other professionals, writing pedagogical documents, and individual teaching are on the list.

Attention is drawn to the variety of tasks assigned to the support teacher and their specificity in the context of students' needs. For example, concerning working in an inclusive classroom of hearing-impaired students, Antia (1999) lists such responsibilities as direct instruction, adapting teaching strategies and materials, coordinating instructional planning, planning and directing special education assistants and interpreters, promoting peer relationships, teaching sign language, interpreting for deaf students, and communicating with parents. On the other hand, special educators working primarily with pupils with intellectual disabilities specified, in addition to classroom tasks, supervision, school development activities, and care for the health of students, explicitly adapting and implementing curricula, individual educational plans, and evaluating learning outcomes, creating an accessible learning environment; health promotion; and working with the principal (Anderson & Östlund, 2019).

Anaby et al. (2020) analyzed a review of current and ideal roles performed by team members supporting a student with special educational needs, including the special educator. Among the roles most commonly performed within the micro and mesosystem were adjusting the task, for example, modifying a lesson or classroom assignment, reducing the workload, or providing accommodations such as extending time to complete work; offering individualized academic and personal support and ensuring that the student receives personal attention as part of his or her educational plan; working in teams; being available to students; family-school collaboration; and providing direct support to students.

Suggested ways to improve role-playing included team teaching or cooperative learning as well as classroom support and feedback offered by professionals in the classroom.

Another area of research is the amount of time spent on various tasks. Research shows that academic instruction, instructional support, and paperwork take the most time for a special educator, leaving less time for personal issues, collaboration, and consultation, supervision, discipline and planning, and evaluation (Vannest & Hagan-Burke 2010, Vannest et al. 2011).

In Poland, since January 1, 2016, there has been an obligation to employ co-teachers in mainstream schools for students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders or with multiple disabilities (Ministry of National Education, 2017). Co-teachers must carry out educational, therapeutic, cooperative, and consultation tasks in collaboration with other teachers and specialists. Within the scope of the tasks resting on the co-teacher and the team providing psychological and pedagogical assistance at the level of the institution is the development of a multidisciplinary assessment of the student, allowing the development of an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) (Bombińska-Domżał, 2012).

The competence of support teachers entitles them to co-teach with other teachers. The subject teacher and the co-teacher can exchange responsibilities. Although co-teaching can take various forms, the team-teaching model is the most effective in terms of inclusive education. Educational practice reports that the role of the co-teacher in classroom management is marginalized only when working with the designated student, which minimizes the chance of students with special educational needs to integrate into their peer group (Szumski et al., 2021). Taking into account the individual needs of students with special educational needs, co-teachers adapt materials, including class work, to their actual abilities, often lowering the requirements (Wieczorek-Płochocka, 2023). The co-teacher, a specialist in special education, carries out consulting activities aimed at helping teachers choose methods and forms of work for students with special educational needs. He/she is often responsible for conducting remedial classes as well (Celuch, 2020).

In conducting a study of the relationship between co-teachers and subject teachers, Skura (2018) indicated their invaluable role in moments of crisis. They are seen as experts capable of skillfully influencing behavior, including a student's attitude, when the student refuses to cooperate by displaying undesirable behavior. Support teachers are also the initiators of inclusion activities. They

strive to include dysfunctional children in the classroom and the school community. The roles prove the legitimacy of delegating the co-teacher to classrooms with students with special educational needs. Unfortunately, misinterpretation of the role can lead to their stigmatization. There is then a risk that this role will be marginalized to maintain discipline in the classroom.

The literature also shows that the co-teacher is responsible for communication between the school, parents, and other institutions, such as psychological and pedagogical counseling centers and teacher training centers. The co-teachers pay the greatest attention to students with special educational needs, so they are most often delegated to discuss the students' progress and behavior with their parents or legal guardians (Soszyńska, 2021).

The results of international research indicate the complex nature of the tasks of the support teacher carried out in collaboration with the classroom teacher, other specialists, parents, and the student himself. These tasks comprise assessment, education, therapy, collaboration, and consultation. The extensive list of tasks that make up the description of the complex role of the co-teacher is particularly interesting. Few reports in the literature indicate the frequency with which special education teachers perform the tasks assigned to their role or the various determinants of this role. Therefore, the research described in this article poses research problems designed to fill this gap.

METHODS

Design

The study involved the analysis of the tasks performed by a co-teacher in a Polish elementary school. The dependent variables were the scope and frequency of performing these tasks. The independent variables taken into consideration were (1) teachers' tenure, (2) professional rank, and (3) qualifications in special education. These variables proved to be significant in analyzing the tasks carried out by teachers (Göransson et al., 2016; Griffin et al., 2009). The research aims were formulated in the following questions:

1. What is the scope and frequency of the tasks performed by a co-teacher in an elementary school?
2. Do teachers' tenure, professional rank, and qualifications in special education differentiate the frequency of tasks assigned to their role?

Descriptive and correlational quantitative research designs were selected to describe the scope and frequencies of the support teachers' tasks and determine their correlations.

Instruments

The survey addressed to teachers of inclusive and integrated elementary schools in Poland consisted of three scales of a total of 36 closed questions and demographic questions (about age, tenure, professional rank, and qualifications in special education).

The three scales used in the survey stem from an analysis of the literature, which highlighted three categories of tasks performed by support teachers:

- Diagnostic Tasks listed in the literature most often did not constitute a separate category but were embedded in the broader collaboration with the team of specialists and parents, serving to learn about the capabilities and needs of the student (Antia, 1999; Mihajlovic, 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2023) and to complete related documentation (Mihajlovic, 2020). However, due to the critical role and complexity of the tasks, they are placed in a separate 9-item scale in the survey;
- Education and therapy: Following what the literature reveals, this 18-item scale includes consulting collaborative activities with the teacher (Paloniemi et al., 2023), developing and modifying IEPs, and completing documentation (Mihajlovic, 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2023), creating an accessible learning environment (Anderson & Östlund, 2019); teaching collaboratively (Mihajlovic, 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2023), adapting teaching strategies and materials (Anaby et al. 2020; Antia, 1999), assisting SEN students and assessing their progress (Anaby et al., 2020; Mihajlovic, 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2023), shaping student behavior (Skura, 2018) and an inclusive climate (Antia, 1999; Paloniemi et al., 2023; Skura, 2018). The scale also includes tasks not always undertaken by a co-teacher in an inclusive classroom, such as providing remedial instruction. In addition, professional development tasks are added as their relationship to a teacher's level of task performance was indicated by Göransson et al. (2015) and Naraian and Schlessinger (2018);
- Collaboration and consultation: The final 9-item scale includes tasks involving cooperation and consultation with the team, other teachers, parents, and agencies, as indicated in Anaby et al. (2020) and Mihajlovic (2020), as well as coordinating instructional planning by Antia (1999), advising other teachers by Anderson and Östlund, (2019) and collaboration with parents by Anaby et al. (2020), Antia (1999), Paloniemi et al. (2023) and Soszyńska (2021). Cooperation with agencies indicated in Soszyńska's (2021) study was also included in this category.

None of the scales included tasks related to school development and taking care of students' health (Anderson & Östlund, 2019), mainly attributed to SENCOs or medical staff. The option of answers to closed questions devoted to the frequency of implementation of a given task consisted of four Likert scale items: never, rarely, sometimes, and always.

Sample size

The research sample was determined by the criteria of being an active support teacher in an inclusive or integrated elementary school class. The sampling was conducted in a non-random manner through voluntary response selection. A request to complete the questionnaire was posted on six social media portals connecting 163,245 support teachers. A total of 224 surveys (0.13%) were received from respondents. The final analysis was carried out on 200. The remaining 24 were either incomplete or filled in by preschool co-teachers. The largest age group consisted of teachers aged 30-40 years ($n=86$, 43%), those with a short tenure, that is, up to 5 years ($n=84$, 42%), contract teachers ($n=71$, 35.5%), and appointed teachers ($n=55$, 27.5%). The vast majority obtained their qualification as a special education teacher from postgraduate studies in pedagogy ($n=141$, 70.5%). All respondents were employed in special pedagogy in Polish elementary schools. The differences in size between the group of younger respondents with a shorter tenure, lower professional rank, and qualifications and older certified teachers with longer tenure and higher degrees in special education result from the relatively recent introduction of the obligation to employ a co-teacher in a class with a student with autism spectrum disorders (Ministry of National Education, 2017), as well as the possibility of obtaining the qualification of the special educator in a shorter period, i.e., within the framework of three-semester postgraduate studies. Detailed characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Procedure

The research project took three and a half years to complete. The analysis of the literature in 2021 made it possible to develop three scales identifying the range of tasks assigned to the support teacher. Three attempts were made in the following years (2021, 2022, and 2023) to collect sufficient responses from respondents. The survey was conducted online between April 2021 and December 2023 using the Forms platform. A request to complete the questionnaire was posted on social media portals for co-teachers. The data was processed from the beginning

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	N	%
AGE OF RESPONDENTS		
Less than 30	42	21.00
30-40	86	43.00
41 and over	57	28.50
Over 50	15	7.50
TENURE		
Up to 5 years	84	42.00
6-10 years	48	24.00
11 years and more	68	34.00
PROFESSIONAL RANK		
Trainee/early career teacher	52	26.00
Contract teacher	71	35.50
Appointed teacher	55	27.50
Certified teacher	22	11.00
QUALIFICATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION		
A bachelor's degree	9	4.50
Associate degree in special education	23	11.50
Two-degree or unified master's degree	20	10.00
Postgraduate studies in special education	141	70.50
Bachelor's / complementary Master's and postgraduate degree in special education	7	3.50

of 2024, and the survey report was prepared. Due to the use of an ordinal scale, the data was described by providing counts (N) and percentages (%), and when comparing the data, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used. The statistical significance of the differences was expressed as the p-value, which constitutes the lowest level of importance at which the hypothesis is rejected. Differences are considered significant for $p < 0.05$. The Statistica package was used to analyze the results statistically. The survey roadmap below shows the subsequent stages of the project. (Figure 1.).

Ethical issues

Respondents were informed of the purpose and goal of the research and assured of its anonymity. Participation in the research was voluntary - none of the questions used in the questionnaire dealt with sensitive issues. The design of the questions was based on legal guidelines and analysis of the literature on the subject. The uploaded responses do not contain respondents' data, allowing them to be identified, which were held on the principle of anonymity. Ethical approval was gained from the Ethical Committee of Casimir Pulaski Radom University.

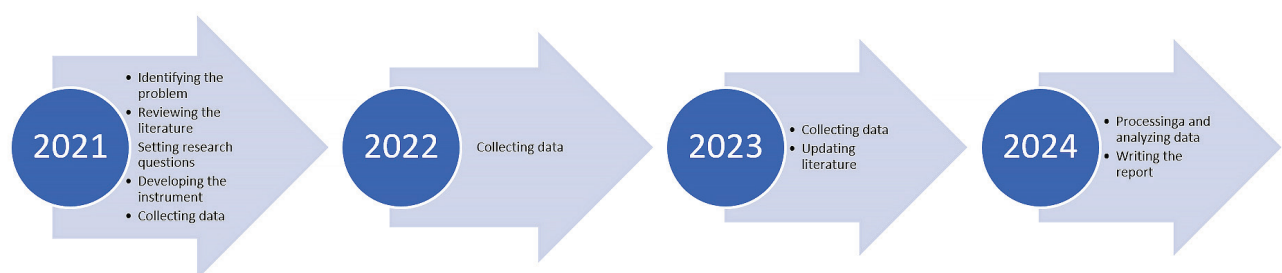


Figure 1. The survey roadmap

Reliability and validity of the study

The reliability of each scale separately was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha. The obtained results indicate satisfactory consistency in Cronbach’s alpha range between min. .717, and max. .819. Internal consistency was good for the Diagnostic Tasks Scale ($\alpha = .717$). The Educational and Therapeutic Tasks Scale was very good ($\alpha = .819$), and the Collaboration and Consultation Scale - was good ($\alpha = .726$). The three-scale measurement tool meets content validity criteria as it tests all aspects of the concept mentioned in the study (see description of the instrument).

RESULTS

The results for the three categories of tasks performed by the special educator are described below: diagnostic tasks, educational-therapeutic tasks, and collaboration-consultation tasks.

Diagnostic tasks of special education teacher

Educational and therapeutic work should be embedded in a reliable assessment of the child’s abilities, developmental needs, and talents. The special educator plays an essential role in this process by undertaking several preliminary and ongoing diagnostic activities. The following table contains data on the frequency of diagnostic tasks declared by the respondents.

From Table 2, it can be noted that the majority of respondents always or often use all the listed methods in the initial diagnosis of the student’s needs and abilities. They made the initial assessment of students’ needs and abilities with the class teacher and a team. The highest

percentage of teachers always and often analyze the records of SEN students (90.5%), interview their parents (76%), and analyze, in collaboration with the class teacher, behavioral (74%) and learning (70%) challenges of the SEN students as well as consult their evaluation with other specialists (59.8%). Fewer respondents indicated using ready-made observation tools (sometimes 45.5%; never 7.5%) or constructing their research tools (sometimes 46.7%; never 10.2%). Table 3 presents the results of correlation studies between the frequency of diagnostic tasks and the respondents’ tenure, degree of professional development, and qualifications.

A significant positive but weak correlation was found between the initial assessment of students’ needs and abilities and the class teacher and tenure ($p = 0.029$; $r = 0.155$), as well as the analysis of learning challenges with the class teacher and the tenure ($p = 0.002$; $r = 0.214$) and the degree of professional development ($p = 0.013$; $r = 0.175$), as well as the analysis of behavioral challenges with the class teacher and the tenure ($p = 0.000$; $r = 0.288$) and the degree of professional development ($p = 0.008$; $r = 0.188$) of the respondents. Teachers with more years of service and a higher degree of professional development were likelier to perform these tasks than respondents with less seniority and a lower degree of professional development.

Educational and Therapeutic Tasks

One of the critical tasks of the special education teacher is the implementation, in collaboration with the class teacher, of the student’s IEP. Educational and therapeutic goals are closely intertwined. Most of them are imple-

Table 2. Frequency of diagnostic tasks of special education teacher

Factor	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N (%)
Initial assessment of students’ needs and abilities made with the class teacher	135	67.5	39	19.5	18	9	8	4	200 (100)
Initial assessment of students’ needs and abilities made with the team	113	65.5	54	27	20	10	13	6,6	200 (100)
Analysis of the students’ documentation	181	90.5	13	6.5	3	1.5	3	1.5	200 (100)
Interview with parents	152	76	37	18.5	6	3	5	2.5	200 (100)
Use of ready-made observation tools	64	32	91	45.5	30	15	15	7.5	200 (100)
Development of diagnostic tools	41	20.8	92	46.7	44	22.3	20	10.2	197 (100)
Analyzing the learning challenges of SEN students	140	70	44	22	14	7	2	1	200 (100)
Analyzing the behavior challenges of SEN students	148	74	40	20	12	6			200 (100)
Consultation with other specialists	119	59.8	60	30.2	13	6.5	7	3.5	199 (100)

Table 3. Diagnostic tasks of special education teacher and variables (p)

Factors	Tenure	Qualifications in special education	Professional rank
Initial assessment of students' needs and abilities made with the class teacher	0.029* (.155)	0.859	0.307
Initial assessment of students' needs and abilities made with the team	0.059	0.990	0.161
Analysis of the students' documentation	0.539	0.905	0.867
Interview with parents	0.396	0.094	0.271
Use of ready-made observation tools	0.738	0.131	0.981
Development of diagnostic tools	0.951	0.441	0.716
Analyzing the learning challenges of SEN students	0.002**	0.359	0.013*
Analyzing the behavior challenges of SEN students	0.000***	0.125	0.008**
Consultation with other specialists	0.134	0.216	0.424

***p < 0,001; **p < 0,01; *p < 0,05

mented during educational activities in the classroom, and some during remedial activities outside the classroom. A special education teacher can carry out edu-

cational and therapeutic tasks within both frameworks. Within the framework of collaboration with the class teacher, he/she undertakes both instructional and inclu-

Table 4. Frequency of educational and therapeutic tasks

Factors	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N (%)
Consulting joint activities with a teacher	106	53	70	35	17	9	7	4	200 (100)
Completing documentation with a teacher	96	48	55	28	27	14	20	10	198 (100)
Development and modification of IEP by SE teacher alone	76	38	68	34	24	12	32	16	200 (100)
Development and modification of IEP with a team	97	49	53	27	28	14	21	11	199 (100)
Adapting lessons with a teacher	117	59	66	33	12	6	5	3	200 (100)
Applying the principles of universal design in creating an accessible learning environment	60	30	73	36.5	38	19	29	14.5	199 (100)
Co-teaching	70	26	52	36	36	18	39	20	197 (100)
Preparing separate tasks, exercises, and worksheets	73	37	84	42	31	16	12	6	200 (100)
Modifying tasks, exercises, and worksheets	64	32	93	47	25	13	18	9	200 (100)
Assisting SEN students in a class	170	85	28	14	1	1			199 (100)
Shaping SEN students' behaviors	138	69.7	38	19.2	18	9.1	4	2	198 (100)
Evaluating students' progress with a teacher	124	62	52	26	15	8	8	4	199 (100)
Organizing awareness meetings	73	37	70	35	32	16	24	12	199 (100)
Preparing peers to accept a new SEN student	109	55	54	27	20	10	16	8	199 (100)
Shaping a positive classroom climate	161	81	32	16	7	4			200 (100)
Remedial classes for students in one's class	100	50	40	20	18	9	41	21	199 (100)
Remedial classes for students from other classes	65	33	53	27	24	12	57	29	199 (100)
Professional development	105	52	73	37	14	7	8	4	200 (100)

sive tasks related mainly to students with special educational needs, e.g., adapting educational materials to their needs, but also tasks related to working with the whole class (e.g., organizing disability awareness meetings). This collaboration with the teacher should concern the preparation of the lesson, its conduct, and evaluation. Table for contains data on the frequency of educational-therapeutic tasks declared by the respondents.

Analysis of the data in Table 4 shows that, on average, one in two (53%) co-teachers always meet with other teachers to consult on jointly undertaken activities for students with special educational needs or the entire class. This collaboration can take the form of jointly completing documentation. Almost half of the support teachers surveyed (48%) said they consistently fulfil this duty with another teacher. A similar percentage of respondents (49%) indicated the option of “always” answering whether a team of teachers and specialists is responsible for developing and modifying the IEP in the institutions where they are employed. Almost 4 out of 10 co-teachers surveyed (38%) cannot count on the support of other teachers in fulfilling this duty, resulting in their working independently in this

area. 34% of the respondents declared that they sometimes have to develop and make modifications to the IEP independently, without always being able to count on the support of other team members. Among the tasks always performed by most respondents are the typical tasks of a co-teacher’s role, consisting of supporting SEN students in the classroom (85%) and shaping their behavior (69.7%). Notably, 52% of respondents always perform tasks related to their professional development. Table 5 presents the correlation results between the frequency of educational and therapeutic tasks and the respondents’ seniority, degree of professional rank, and qualifications.

As can be concluded from the data in Table 5, a statistically significant positive relationship occurred between the frequency of setting assignments with the teacher ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.264$) and the conduct of remedial activities with students in their class ($p = 0.049$, $r = 0.139$) and the qualifications of the teacher. Teachers with higher qualifications undertake these tasks more often. Additionally, the preparation of separate tasks and exercises for the student was positively correlated with the seniority of the respondents ($p = 0.028$, $r = 0.155$), and the conduct

Table 5. Educational and therapeutic tasks and variables (p)

Factors	Tenure	Qualifications in special education	Professional rank
Consulting joint activities with a teacher	0.937	0.000***	0.413
Completing documentation	0.288	0.149	0.765
Development and modification of IEP by SE teacher alone	0.046*	0.550	0.001**
Development and modification of IEP with a team	0.102	0.102	0.544
Adapting lessons	0.708	0.058	0.120
Applying the principles of universal design in creating an accessible learning environment	0.450	0.845	0.145
Co-teaching	0.058	0.182	0.245
Preparing separate tasks, exercises and worksheets	0.028*	0.762	0.317
Modifying tasks, exercises and worksheets	0.551	0.445	0.227
Assisting SEN students in a class	0.1344	0.722	0.869
Shaping SEN students’ behaviors	0.000***	0.589	0.003**
Evaluating students’ progress	0.098	0.784	0.161
Organizing awareness meetings	0.060	0.937	0.933
Preparing peers to accept a new SEN student	0.070	0.123	0.692
Shaping a positive classroom climate	0.158	0.897	0.990
Remedial classes for students in my class	0.382	0.049*	0.349
Remedial classes for students from other classes	0.117	0.239	0.027*
Professional development	0.078	0.970	0.100

*** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

of remedial classes with students in other classes with the professional rank of the teachers ($p = 0.027$, $r = 0.156$). These were relationships of weak intensity. A negative correlation of weak intensity occurred between a teacher's development of an IEP independently and seniority ($p = 0.046$, $r = -0.140$) and degree of professional development ($p = 0.001$, $r = -0.225$). This means that more experienced teachers are more likely to collaborate as a team in developing and evaluating the program. Moreover, a positive weak correlation occurred between shaping SEN students' behaviors by a teacher and seniority ($p = 0.000$, $r = 0.254$) and degree of professional development ($p = 0.003$, $r = 0.207$). More experienced teachers are more likely to shape SEN students' behavior.

Collaboration and Consultation

According to current legislation (Ministry of National Education, 2017), the special education teacher is part of the team supporting a student with special educational needs. The team discusses and processes the results of the multidisciplinary diagnosis, then develops and evaluates an individual educational plan. The team should meet at least twice a year. The team's work is coordinated by the teacher of the class the student attends or by a teacher or specialist who teaches the student, designated by the school principal. As shown in Table 6, most respondents attend team meetings (77%) and do not always chair them. Only 32% always coordinate the team's work, and almost as many teachers do so frequently (32%). It is of concern that some teachers never participate in team meetings or do so rarely. It is worth noting that the tasks

related to cooperation with parents, including the formation of mutual relations between parents of students with and without disabilities, are always carried out by the majority of respondents.

Table 7 presents the results of correlation studies between the frequency of cooperative and consultative tasks and the respondents' seniority, degree of professional development, and qualifications.

There was a significant positive correlation between seniority/professional rank and their teamwork coordination ($p = 0.019$, $r = 0.165$; $p=0.001$, $r=0.220$), being invited by other teachers to their classes for observation and consultation ($p = 0.049$, $r = 0.140$; $p = 0.011$, $r = 0.180$), and helping parents in collaboration with teachers and other specialists ($p = 0.001$, $r = 0.230$; $p = 0.000$, $r = 0.295$), and undertaking cooperation with external institutions ($p = 0.002$, $r = 0.290$; $p = 0.000$, $r = 0.265$). There was also a positive correlation between seniority and informing parents ($p = 0.007$, $r = 0.189$). There was a moderate correlation between helping parents cooperate with teachers and other specialists and the level of professional development. In the other cases, it was weak. Teachers with a higher degree of experience and higher levels of professional development were likelier to perform these more complex tasks than respondents with less experience and lower levels of professional development.

DISCUSSION

The framework of the role of a support teacher is outlined in the Polish educational system, which is similar to other

Table 6. Frequency of collaboration and consultation with the team, other teachers, parents, and agencies.

Factors	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N (%)
Meetings with the team	154	77	23	12	16	8	7	4	200 (100)
Coordination of the team's work	76	38	64	32	31	16	28	14	199 (100)
Guiding other teachers	90	45	86	43	18	9	6	3	200 (100)
Invited by other teachers for observation and consultation	34	17	76	38	40	20	50	25	200 (100)
Informing parents	170	85	27	14	2	1	1	1	200 (100)
Guiding parents	140	70	55	28	5	3			200 (100)
Assisting parents in collaboration with teachers and specialists	131	66	55	28	12	6	1	1	199 (100)
Shaping collaboration between parents of students with and without disabilities	106	54	68	34	16	8	8	4	198 (100)
Collaboration with agencies	77	39	82	40	27	14	14	7	200 (100)

Table 7. Collaboration and consultation with teamwork, other teachers, parents, and agencies, and variables (p)

Factors	Tenure	Qualification in special education	Professional rank
Meetings with the team	0.556	0.891	0.324
Coordination of the team's work	0.019*	0.972	0.001**
Guiding other teachers	0.065	0.615	0.095
Invited by other teachers for observation and consultation	0.049*	0.998	0.011*
Informing parents	0.007**	0.605	0.093
Guiding parents	0.101	0.889	0.056
Assisting parents in collaboration with teachers and specialists	0.001**	0.618	0.000***
Shaping collaboration between parents of students with and without disabilities	0.136	0.443	0.119
Collaboration with agencies	0.002**	0.846	0.000***

*** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$

countries. However, there is some flexibility in how it is carried out, for example, the frequency of certain tasks or the character of collaboration with the class teacher during lessons. The law also indicates various options for coordinating the work of the team. This is in line with reports of international research, which indicate that the role of the special educator in the inclusive education system is only framed by the educational authorities, and its actual scope is determined by the school based on the current needs of the students (Göransson et al., 2013; Magnússon et al., 2018; Göransson et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2020). This positive trend allows flexible solutions to be introduced in countries with different economic statuses. However, there are concerns that a co-teacher may be assigned too many duties in countries with low educational expenditures. Overload can lead to a lack of time for joint meetings and planning (often not included in a teacher's working hours), professional burnout, and an exodus of special educators from schools or difficulty in recruiting new ones (Dadvand & Lampert, 2024; Mason-Williams et al., 2020). In order to avoid this, there is a need to clarify the responsibilities in relation to the institution's needs and the support teacher's workload.

The research presented in this paper shows that the respondents perform tasks of a diagnostic, educational-therapeutic, and collaborative-consultative character, also mentioned by Mihajlovic (2020). In studies by other authors, the category of diagnostic tasks is not considered separate. This may be because it accompanies ongoing educational-therapeutic and collaborative-consultative tasks, such as writing pedagogical documents and consultative collaboration with teachers, parents, and specialists

(Paloniemi et al., 2023). This group of tasks seems to be underestimated, although it is the basis for further educational and therapeutic activities.

This is especially important in countries with a low economic status in which a special education teacher is the only specialist who can detect the early signs of a child's disability and take the necessary therapeutic measures.

Referring to the frequency of diagnostic tasks, it can be noted that most respondents in a student's initial and ongoing diagnosis always perform the essential tasks of assessment. The least mentioned was the use of ready-made tools and the design of their diagnostic tools. Teachers with more seniority and a higher level of professional development were more likely to analyze the student's learning and behavioral challenges with the classroom teacher. What is needed, however, is for them to have access to standardized observation tools or to develop them themselves. This is especially important in countries with limited access to specialists.

Educational-therapeutic tasks performed by the majority of respondents include the educational support of the individual student and his/her social inclusion. Tasks of a strictly therapeutic nature tend to be carried out with the student by other professionals outside the classroom. This is in line with the research of other authors, who listed tasks of an educational and inclusive nature as central to the role of the special educator and performed by them most often (Anaby et al., 2020; Göransson et al., 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Paloniemi et al., 2023; Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010; Vannest et al., 2011). This shows a tendency to implement educational and

therapeutic tasks mainly within the classroom, in cooperation with the classroom teacher. Specialized classes held outside the classroom are not the main form of support, although, as this research shows, they are still used and needed (see Yazçayır & Gürgür, 2023).

There are also differences in how often teachers with different levels of qualification undertake tasks. Teachers with higher qualifications were more likely to perceive the need to agree on tasks with the classroom teacher than to plan them themselves, indicating their understanding of the value of collaboration as important for the inclusion of students with disabilities. This is somewhat consistent with the findings of Göransson et al. (2016), which indicate that special educators with higher qualifications were more likely to be involved in implementing inclusive practices compared to teachers with only additional training in special education, who focused primarily on working with the student.

Teachers with more experience were more likely to prepare separate tasks and exercises for the students and to conduct remedial activities with students from different classes, which allowed them to use their competence in this area. They were more likely to work together as a team when performing educational and therapeutic tasks. Teachers with less experience are less often assigned to these time-consuming and labor-intensive tasks that require advanced skills. According to Griffin et al. (2009), novice special educators take more time to prepare the program, teaching aids, especially if they work with many teachers in different subjects.

Most respondents' collaborative and consultative tasks were primarily related to collaboration with the students' parents and meetings with the team. This is supported by the findings of other authors that indicate that special educators spend a significant amount of time collaborating with the students' families (Anaby et al., 2020; Paloniemi et al., 2023), other specialists, and the team (Paloniemi et al., 2023). Among other things, this collaboration provides advice and consultation (Göransson et al., 2015; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Paloniemi et al., 2023). Few studies (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010; Vannest et al., 2011) indicate less time spent on consulting, collaboration, and supervision, which may be due to the significant number of tasks assigned to special educators. Teachers with more seniority and a higher degree of professional development are more likely to perform more complex tasks (coordinating the work of the team, observing other teachers' classes and consulting with them, assisting parents in collaboration with teachers and other specialists, undertaking cooperation with ex-

ternal institutions) than respondents with less seniority and a lower degree of professional development, which is justified by the professional experience of the former. These results indicate the need for the co-teacher to play the role of advisor or supervisor. This applies especially to more experienced teachers whose scope of tasks requires more time to be devoted to these more complex and advanced activities.

LIMITATIONS

The research presented in this article has some limitations. Firstly, the research was voluntary; only those interested completed the questionnaire. Furthermore, not all questionnaires were completed correctly, which reduced the number of respondents. To standardize the group, the analysis did not include questionnaires completed by preschool teachers. Secondly, it is also worth considering other variables in the study, such as the educational level, the type of student's disability, and the type of institution (public, non-public) or its location (urban, rural school). Thirdly, surveys should be interpreted with caution, as they have the character of a subjective declaration of the respondents. To minimize the effect of the subjectivity of respondents' responses, they were asked to answer honestly and were informed of the purpose of the study, and the results were analyzed in the context of other surveys.

CONCLUSIONS

The presented research enabled the scope and frequency of the tasks of a Polish elementary school support teacher to be determined. The research shows that respondents always perform most of the diagnostic tasks indicated. However, they need training in using professional diagnostic tools or constructing their own. Similarly, in terms of carrying out educational and therapeutic tasks, the most frequently mentioned are the typical tasks of a support teacher related to constructing an IEP with the teacher, adapting lessons, and assisting the student with disabilities. Noteworthy, they also shape the positive, inclusive climate of the entire classroom.

Further training in co-teaching is advisable, as well as in organizing awareness meetings. On the other hand, in terms of tasks of a collaborative nature, teachers most often meet with the team and undertake all the tasks related to cooperation with parents, including forming an equal relationship between parents of children, both with and without disabilities. To a limited extent, they act as advisors to other teachers. Teachers with more ex-

perience and education carry out more advanced tasks related to consultation with classroom teachers, analysis of student needs, preparation of adapted materials, and formation of student behavior. They also undertake more advanced tasks associated with coordinating their team's work, advising teachers and parents, and collaborating with agencies.

The research presented in this article fills a gap in the studies of the scope and frequency of tasks performed by a support teacher in the Polish educational system. This model is not applied in all countries. However, the diversity and complexity of the tasks assigned to a special education teacher indicate the necessity of his or her employment in institutions that implement inclusive education. The present research has made a distinction between diagnostic, educational-therapeutic, and collaborative-consultation tasks. It is worth noting that diagnostic tasks were given special attention because their nature was considered significant. In the studies of other authors, this category is not treated as a separate one. In addition, the research confirmed the need to consider the subjective nature of the special educator's role, which can be shaped in terms of flexible disposition of time according to the needs of the institution that employs him or her and the professional experience of the special educator. As the presented research shows, more complex diagnostic, therapeutic, and collaborative-consultative tasks are more often entrusted to teachers with more experience. This indicates areas for improvement (in co-teaching, use of diagnostic tools, and their development), especially in teachers with less experience (including more complex tasks of a collaborative-consultative nature).

Comprehensively defining the scope of the support teacher's role has several practical implications. It will allow for a more precise characterization of his or her job, flexibly adapted to the needs of a particular classroom or institution. It can provide a basis for agreement between the class teacher and the support teacher on the scope and dimension of jointly and/or separately performed tasks, or the identification of tasks that should be prioritized in the support teacher's work in a given context. A detailed list of tasks will make it possible to determine the skills the support teacher needs. These skills should be taught as part of special education degree courses or provided as part of in-service training.

It is also important to point out the need for a co-teacher whose presence, as a specialist, is essential, especially in classrooms with students with more significant special needs. All participants in classroom life need the co-teacher: the student with a disability in achieving educational and social goals; the student's peers in terms of disability awareness; the classroom teacher in the joint diagnosis and organization of the educational and therapeutic process, as well as parents in recognizing the child's abilities and needs and providing advice.

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