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COMPETENCES OF A SPECIAL EDUCATOR IN PRE-SCHOOL AND EARLY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Keywords: teacher competences, special education, student with an intellectual disability.

The article deals with issues relating to the competences of support teachers working in kindergartens and grades 1-3 of primary schools. It presents, synthetically the areas related to knowledge and skills and attitudes that should be demonstrated by special educators working with children with an intellectual disability. Moreover, the article also explains which formal qualifications a supporting teacher should have and also, those which a special educator working in educational institutions at the pre-school and early school level should have.

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KOMPETENCJE PEDAGOGA SPECJALNEGO W EDUKACJI PRZEDSZKOLNEJ I WCZESNOSZKOLNEJ

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje nauczycielskie, pedagogika specjalna, uczeń niepełnosprawny intelektualnie.

Artykuł porusza zagadnienia związane z kompetencjami nauczycieli pomocniczych pracujących w przedszkolach oraz klasach I-III szkół podstawowych. Przedstawia w sposób syntetyczny obszary związane z wiedzą i umiejętnościami oraz postawami, jakie powinni wykazywać pedagodzy specjaliści pracujący z dziećmi niepełnosprawnymi intelektualnie. Ponadto w artykule wyjaśniono, jakie kwalifikacje formalne powinien posiadać nauczyciel wspomagający, a także jakie powinien posiadać pedagog specjalny pracujący w placówkach oświatowych na poziomie przedszkolnym i wczesnoszkolnym.

Introduction

Pursuant to the currently applicable provisions of law, institutions providing education for children with special educational needs should employ a teacher who co-organizes the education process, commonly referred to as a supporting teacher. His or her duties include conducting – together with other teachers – educational activities, cooperation with other teachers, specialists and parents, helping other teachers in choosing appropriate forms and methods of working with children and conducting classes corresponding to the individual development and educational needs of students (Soszyńska 2021, p. 40).

The educational, revalidation and didactic work of a special pedagogue requires him or her not only to have a predisposed personality but also practical competences which condition effective and purposeful actions of a special nature. Educational effects can be brought by rationally planned and conscious pedagogical activity focused on specific goals. An important factor of such interactions is the adaptation of methods and techniques, as well as individual development tasks, to the needs and capabilities of the student (Lewko 2015, p. 341).

Additionally, it should be noted that the role of teachers in kindergartens and grades 1-3 of primary schools is a significant one for the children. In particular, the teachers are required to be competent in many areas which makes their job extremely difficult. Such a teacher, in addition to carrying out preparation in the field of pre-school and early childhood education, must also be prepared in the field of special education, which shows at the very least what qualifications must be acquired.

In this context, the role of kindergarten teachers is special because (Sobkowiak 2022, p. 154):

- they should have the competences necessary to support the child’s development;
- have the ability to reduce any disadvantages or negative effects resulting from an un-supporting or dysfunctional family environment of the child;
- have a source of planned and evaluated activities aimed at the development of the children.

In turn, Krystyna Duraj-Nowakowa (1998, p. 34) believes that the substantive preparation for early school education teachers is special, due to the organizational form implemented in grades 1-3, which is known as integrated education. This integration consists in combining, merging and creating a whole from the parts. The essence of integrated learning is to show children a unified picture of the world. Organizing knowledge in an integrated approach takes place by determining the issues intended for learning by children and then selecting appropriate facts from various scientific disciplines, allowing for a multilateral analysis of these issues.

As noted by Kinga Kuszak (201, p. 23) “in the 21st century, therefore, there is a need for open and flexible teachers: flexibly coping with changes and diversity: responding to the diverse and individual needs of students, changing formal and legal regulations, fluid social relations, changing opportunities, etc., and through its flexibility it supports students in shaping their life attitudes”.

Teacher’s competences

Competence is a term that is used in many fields of science: psychology, sociology, law. For many years, it has also been used as a subject of theoretical considerations and scientific research in pedagogy (Nowak-Łojewska 2020, p. 50).

When discussing the competences of teachers, three groups can be distinguished (Taraszkiewicz 2001, p. 175):

- substantive competences that relate to the issues of the taught subject
 - the teacher is an expert and subject advisor;
- didactic and methodological competences that relate to the teacher’s and student’s workshops, i.e. teaching and learning methods and techniques, especially activating and design and group work – the teacher is a teaching advisor;

- educational competences that relate to different ways of influencing students, such as communication skills, networking, problem-solving skills of a given developmental age, etc.

Stanisław Dylak (1995, za: Wosik-Kawala 2007, p. 88) perceives teachers' competences as knowledge, skills, dispositions, attitudes and values necessary for the effective implementation of the adopted goals. This author distinguishes three groups of teacher's professional competences:

- basic competences – they allow the teacher to follow certain ethical rules. They result from moral, social and intellectual development;
- necessary competences – help the teacher to work constructively. They are acquired during the preparation for the profession. These are realization, self-creation and interpretation competences. Realization competences are the teacher's skills that determine the implementation of educational tasks. Self-creation competences enable the teacher to create his own professional profile. They are based on self-knowledge, awareness of the teacher's relationship with others and a positive attitude towards research work. Interpretative competences can be considered in terms of pedagogical values, subjective knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge and skills;
- desired competences may be found in the professional profile of a given teacher, and having them may be helpful resulting in the teacher becoming a significant person for his or her pupils.

Competences of a special educator

As Agnieszka Lewko (2015) writes, educational and revalidation work requires from a special educator not only a predisposed personality but also practical competences and conditioning effective and purposeful actions of a special nature. Educational effects can be achieved by rationally planned, conscious pedagogical activity focused on specific goals. An important factor of such interactions is the adaptation of methods and techniques as well as individual development tasks to the needs and capabilities of the student/ward.

In addition to the theoretical/substantive interdisciplinary preparation, the profession of a pedagogue requires numerous practical competences and both internal and personal predispositions (including characterological and empathic). It includes many elements that can be grouped into three general areas: professionalism, predispositions and competences (Zaorska 2012, p. 15).

Iwona Chrzanowska (2018, p. 27-28) indicates the following areas that should be shaped by future teachers of inclusive education:

- the concept of inclusive education;
- seeing differences between students as an advantage not as an obstacle in working with the group;
- supporting all students;
- programs, teaching methods and the diverse needs of students;
- cooperation with parents;
- collaboration within teams (and in the education sector);
- individual professional development.

Table 1

Competence areas of a special educator

Area of competence	Skills in the area of competence
Inclusive education concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – critical reflection – compliance with the rules of ethics – strategies for counteracting discriminatory attitudes – empathy – an attitude of respect – non-exclusive language
Differences between students seen as an advantage not an obstacle in working with a group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – noticing differences and the ability to diagnose them – a diverse approach to the student – differentiation in the implementation of the curriculum – respect for the effort of each student
Supporting all students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – supporting the development of competences and possibilities – students' communication – supporting the development of competences in the field of student learning – developing self-reliance and independence of students – supporting learning in the group and from each other – positive reinforcement – assessment of learning outcomes taking into account the abilities of students, assessment of progress, but also assessment of the acquisition of social skills
Programs, teaching methods and the diverse needs of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – differentiation of working methods, content of programs and learning outcomes – cooperation with parents – a wide range of teaching methods and concepts – use of ICT and other assistive technologies – the use of practically verified teaching methods, the use of alternative learning methods, flexible teaching

Cooperation with parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – effective communication with the parents / relatives of the student (including those coming from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and socioeconomic communities) – cooperation on the basis of partnership – involving parents and families in support the process of learning of the child / student – supporting parents and families in the process of upbringing and education of the student
Collaboration within teams (and in the education sector)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – teamwork, cooperation, partnership, exchange of experiences, mutual learning from each other the use of management and class management methods own work as an element of the whole (school community) conducive to inter institutional cooperation – using the school's internal resources and external sources of support – evaluation, analysis of the development of the school as a whole – team problem solving – cooperation with specialists
Individual professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – systematic evaluation of one's own needs and achievements – professional development, lifelong learning – flexibility to apply different learning and teaching strategies that lead to innovation and personal development – using time management methods that will allow one to take advantage of the opportunities for professional development in the most suitable and problem free way – openness and willingness to use the knowledge and experience of other teachers and specialists

Source: Chrzanowska 2018, pp. 27-28.

In turn, Anna Zamkowska (2019, p. 97-98) indicates that a teacher working with a student with an intellectual disability at the first stage of education should be characterized by the following categories of teaching competences:

- knowledge about the specificity of the development of a child with a given type of disability and the psychosocial and educational consequences of its disturbed development;
- diagnostic competences, consisting in the ability to make a preliminary and ongoing positive and functional diagnosis of the student's abilities, focused not only on the detection of areas of disorders, but above all

on his or her strengths, undertaken in cooperation with the students and parents of the student;

- educational and innovative competences, concerning the ability to adapt the course of the didactic and educational process to the individual needs and development possibilities of the student and his special talents, as well as to assess the student's progress with the use of innovative didactic solutions and educational strategies; the ability to include him in the class team as an active and accepted member and if necessary, to raise the social competences of a student with a disability;
- personal qualities, including love for a child, kindness, openness to others, patience, perseverance, a cheerful disposition, good emotional control, intuition, creativity, commitment, discipline and responsibility for their work;
- interpersonal competences, helpful in cooperation with various partners (specialists working with the child, parents of a student with a disability) requiring knowledge of the principles and forms of cooperation, skills in interpersonal communication and coping with conflict, as well as an attitude of openness, understanding and respecting the partners' perspective and readiness for self-assessment of feelings and attitudes that may block the process of cooperation.

In particular, attention should be paid to competences related to cooperation with parents. As emphasized by Baczała (2013, p. 81), “[e]ffective implementation of educational, therapeutic and upbringing goals requires the cooperation of parents and specialists. Cooperation must be based on correct relationships that will take into account the needs of both parties. Relationships built on getting to know each other, finding out about mutual expectations, trust, kindness and respect”.

Without good cooperation with parents, the therapeutic and educational process may not be successful. It happens that sometimes this cooperation can be a barrier, but a competent teacher is able to cope with this challenge.

Legal aspects

The education of special educators, especially support teachers, was organized in accordance with the regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of September 7, 2004 on the standards of teacher education, and later in accordance with the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of January 17, 2012 on standards of education preparing for the teaching profession.

Another change introduced in accordance with the Regulation of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on studies of September 27, 2018. was to classify special education in the fields of study that are usually connected to a regular Master's degree. On the other hand, in the following year, the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of July 25, 2019 on the standard of education preparing for the teaching profession introduced new education standards in preparation for the teaching profession.

According to them, a special educator should be prepared, *inter alia*, for the following:

- communicating and cooperating with the environment and active participation in groups and organizations implementing educational, rehabilitation and therapeutic activities rehabilitation;
- activities aimed at improving the quality of the operation of a kindergarten, school or system facility education;
- working in a team, performing various roles in it and cooperating with teachers, educators, professionals, parents or guardians of students and other members school and local community;
- appreciating the traditions and achievements of scientific research in the field of special education and their continuation and expansion with new research areas and procedures;
- analyzing the phenomenon, dependencies, relationships and problems occurring in the area of the teaching-learning process of children and students with special educational needs, referring to psychological knowledge;
- discussing the psychological context of the process of educating children and students with special educational needs;
- describing the process of psychosocial adaptation to life with disability and chronic disease in the context of obtaining a satisfactory quality of life, referring to selected psychological concepts;
- identifying external and internal key resources in developing the potential of children and students with disabilities or a chronic disease;
- identifying and interpreting complex phenomena and support systems for children and students with special educational needs, showing their links with various areas of special education and the fields of social sciences, humanities, medicine and health sciences;
- making a critical analysis of support systems for children and students with special educational needs using selected current conceptual approaches;

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- analyzing behavior, processes and phenomena related to psychosocial needs of family members of children with special educational needs;
 - explaining and identifying factors moderating the diversity of families with a child with special educational needs depending on the type of disorder in the child or student and the coping style of parents or carers with these disorders;
 - recognizing and interpreting the needs of a family with a child with special educational needs in relation to specific family problems;
 - designing the process of supporting a family with a child with special educational needs;
 - recognizing and interpreting complex social problems of adults with disabilities, showing their connections with various areas of special andragogy;
 - analyzing the processes and phenomena concerning the functioning of adults and older people with disabilities, using the current theoretical knowledge in the field of special andragogy;
 - analyzing one's own pedagogical activities and pointing to areas requiring modification and implementing innovative activities in work with adults and elderly people with disabilities;
 - designing a support program for adults with disabilities;
 - designing educational activities, use of non-standard specific solutions regarding problems in the field of special education;
 - individualizing tasks, adapt teaching methods and content to the needs of children and learners, increase cognitive skills, social competences and integration peer.

In accordance with the regulation of the Minister of National Education of August 9, 2017 (as amended) on the conditions for organizing education, upbringing and care for the disabled, socially maladjusted children and adolescents at risk of social maladjustment, a teacher co-organizing the education of students with disabilities (a supporting teacher) should:

- conduct educational activities together with other teachers and, together with other teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups, carry out integrated activities and activities specified in the program;
- conduct, together with other teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups, educational work with students with disabilities, socially maladjusted and at risk of social maladjustment;

- participate, as needed, in educational activities conducted by other teachers and in integrated activities and classes, specified in the program, carried out by teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups;
- provide assistance to teachers conducting educational activities and teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups implementing integrated activities and classes, specified in the program, in the selection of forms and methods of work with students with disabilities, socially maladjusted and at risk of social maladjustment (*Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji...* 2017)

Further changes in the qualifications of the special educator were brought by the ordinance of the Minister of Education and Science of August 22, 2022, amending the ordinance on the specific qualifications required from teachers. According to it, a person who graduated from:

- uniform Master's studies in the field of special pedagogy and has pedagogical preparation or;
- uniform Master's studies or first- or second-cycle studies in the field of special education, and has pedagogical preparation, or;
- uniform Master's studies or first- or second-cycle studies in pedagogy, and has pedagogical preparation, and also completed a qualification course in special education or postgraduate studies in special education or inclusive Education (*Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji...* 2022).

However, this regulation lacks information on the qualifications of the support teacher. This means that it can be any person who has a diploma of any higher education, has psychological and pedagogical and didactic preparation for teaching and has completed a qualification course in special education or postgraduate studies in special education.

Remote learning during the pandemic

The importance of the competence of a support teacher, especially in difficult times, was demonstrated by the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic. Support teachers found themselves in a completely new situation which required new methodological competences, especially related to information and communication technologies as well as high creativity and flexibility in working with children with intellectual disabilities.

Research indicates that, in particular, distance learning for students with disabilities has shown deficiencies in the preparation of schools and

teachers for these forms of education (Tędziągolska et al. 2021). This time was difficult for all teachers, and even more so for special educators. Nobody had foreseen such a situation before and despite the development of many innovative and alternative forms of work with a student with intellectual disabilities the need to develop forms and methods related to distance learning was not noticed before. However, despite the barriers during the pandemic regarding access to education, access to information, the unclear role of the support teacher, the absence of teachers themselves due to COVID, the lack of a specialized development offered for support teachers, limitations related to access to equipment, both on the part of teachers and schools and parents, the challenges related to the rehabilitation of children with disabilities, research shows that the directional education and continuous improvement of competences in the field of working with a disabled child gave these teachers a better preparation for working with these students (Tędziągolska et al. 2021).

It should also be noted that it was not only the competences of supporting teachers that determined the quality of remote work. A lot of literature on the subject mentioned this and the lack of support in the field of specialized training. However, the tools and resources at the disposal of supportive teachers were forgotten, especially during the first lockdown. Even the most competent IT specialist could not show all his/her abilities and skills without the appropriate equipment. And so it was with special educators. During the closure of schools and kindergartens, they had to use only teaching aids at home. Very often they had to improvise, create new tools to work with what they “found at home” and show incredible creativity. It should be remembered that it was support teachers, apart from the fact that they had to adapt to the new educational reality, apart from improving their skills in the field of information and communication technologies, that had to improve their skills in adapting didactic resources to work with intellectually disabled students, which in particular, hindered the teaching process.

Summary

Kamila Soszyńska (2021, p. 63) emphasizes that good cooperation of teachers in the class (lead teacher and support teacher) is one of the main factors determining the success in the education of students with special needs. In recent years, this education has evolved from teaching students with disabilities primarily in special schools, to educating them together with non-disabled peers in mainstream schools. The legal regulations in force in Poland define the role of a special educator as a person who co-organizes

special education, which implies its cooperation not only with the lead teacher, but also with the student's parents and other specialists. The method of work of this teacher should be based jointly on – the lead teacher – teaching, participation in classes and activities specified in the program, as well as – selection of forms and methods used at work. The supporting teacher also adjusts the program and requirements to the individual needs and psychophysical abilities of the student.

In the process of educating future teachers, it becomes necessary to equip them in the course of their studies with knowledge, skills and social competences in the field of working with children with special educational needs (SEN), as well as improving competences and appropriate support of the teaching staff in the field of individualization of teaching and work with children with SEN (Kochanowska 2015, p. 153). At the same time, it is noted that teachers particularly lack contact with mentors (guides, masters) and also they lack traditional forms of improvement based on the exchange of information (Nazaruk, Marchel 2019, p. 73).

In the curricula of future teachers of kindergartens and grades 1-3 of primary schools, particular attention should be paid to increasing cognitive, educational, didactic, diagnostic, innovative, organizational, social and interpersonal competences as well as the skillful use and use of information and communication technologies (Surma 2019, p. 97). In addition, in educating students, a lot of attention should also be paid to internships, which in the face of the dynamics of various processes are invaluable and determine the specificity of the student's activities – the future teacher, and contribute to the formulation of preliminary judgments evaluating preparation for the profession, as well as the quality of the presented specialization and specialization competences (Sikorska, Schmidt 2018, s. 450).

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