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## Cooperation of Special Education Teachers with the General Teacher in Primary Schools: A Survey of Polish Teachers

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### Abstract

The cooperation of the support teacher with the general teacher in an inclusive class is one of the determinants of successful inclusive education. The aim of the research is to analyze the scope and frequency of their cooperation in diagnostic, planning, organizational and educational tasks, as well as their satisfaction with this cooperation and the challenges experienced. The correlation of these variables with teachers' qualifications, professional rank, availability of professional development, and participation in training were analyzed as well. A sample of 200 Polish primary school support teachers were surveyed by on-line questionnaire. The result shows that most of the respondents' tasks involve cooperation with the general teacher. Moreover, their professional development correlates positively with the frequency of accomplishing these tasks. The majority of respondents found this cooperation satisfactory and never experienced difficulties in this respect.

**Keywords:** co-teaching, elementary school, inclusive education, co-teacher.

## Introduction

Students with disabilities have the right to education at all levels of the school system. Their access to education should be free from discrimination on the basis of disability. Equal opportunities in education are guaranteed by the provisions of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). The implementation of these provisions is ensured mainly through the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. However, this requires a variety of measures to ensure their development and social inclusion, combining the features of mainstream education and specialized support. The latest project of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education is strictly concerned with changing the role of specialized support in inclusive education (CROSP) (EASNIE, 2022). The focus is on restructuring the specialized services of mainstream schools in order to provide comprehensive support to students with special educational needs (SEN) based on the interaction of different partners. Furthermore, most studies point to collaboration or collective agency as essential elements for the successful implementation of inclusive education (Miller et al., 2020). One widely used collaborative model for specialist support is the co-teaching approach (e.g., Friend, 2007; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Bombińska-Domżał, 2010; Jurkowski & Müller, 2018; Mouchritsa et al., 2021; Oleńska-Pawlak & Szumski, 2022; Bartuś, 2023; Strogilos et al., 2023). Strogilos et al. (2023) state that this model, despite challenges, can play a crucial role in improving teachers' professional development and student learning. Due to the autonomy of countries in terms of educational governance, the support co-teaching model is organized in different ways. In Italy, for example, the workload of a support teacher is only six hours per week (Lewkowicz, 2019). In German schools, on the other hand, a special educator is present in classes with students with disabilities for most of the lessons (Przybyszewska, 2016).

In Poland, the employment of support teachers is stipulated in the Regulation of the Minister of National Education (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 1309). Principals of mainstream schools are required to employ a support teacher in classes with pupils with a statement of the need for special education issued due to autism spectrum disorders (ASD) or disabilities coupled with ASD. The number of lessons in which a support teacher is present depends on the diagnosis of the student's needs and, in many cases, on the school's staffing capacity. The final decision in this regard is made by the school principal (Czarnocka et al., 2022). Despite the legal obligation to employ support teachers, not all schools comply. A study conducted by the Center for Education Development (Mroczek, 2021) shows that 13.5% of settings experience lack of them. This is mainly due to financial constraints (65.9%) as well as lack of specialists that can be employed (47.7%). This lack causes subject teachers to complete postgraduate

studies in special education in order to be qualified. Pachowicz's study (2020) shows that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the co-teachers surveyed have taken advantage of such an opportunity, and only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of them are graduates of 5-year master's degrees in special education.

Considering the significant role of support teachers, as well as the rapid acquisition of qualifications to replace their lack, the purpose of the article is to analyze the range of tasks they undertake in cooperation with general teachers, especially tasks that require more complex skills. There is a lack of current research by Polish authors on the experiences of support teachers in this regard (Oleńska-Pawlak & Bombińska-Domżał, 2012). More recent studies address students' opinions on teacher collaboration (Szumski, 2022), opinions of general teachers on the characteristics of successful teamwork (Skura, 2018), and the practice of their collaboration with a co-teacher in a class (Jopek-Bizoń & Zawada, 2022; Bartuś, 2023) or have a limited territorial scope (Zaorska, 2022).

## Status of special education teacher

Friend (2007) defines co-teaching as a collaborative model in which the general teacher and the special education teacher share teaching responsibilities. The general teacher focuses on the curriculum, while the support teacher focuses on supporting student learning, developing the Individual Educational Plan (IEP), adapting activities to students' needs, solving the problems encountered, while not always having the opportunity to decide on the content delivered to the entire class (Oleńska-Pawlak & Bombińska-Domżał, 2012; Mouchritsa et al., 2021; Jopek-Bizoń & Zawada, 2022; Paju et al., 2022; Rönn-Liljenfeldt et al., 2023a). The status of support teachers in this reciprocal collaboration is currently not so clearly defined. Most often, the special educators have a subordinate role to the general teachers who "own" their class (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016), but some studies indicate that they have an equal role with them. According to Rönn-Liljenfeldt et al. (2023b), teachers in Finland are free to design the ideal type of co-teaching, which means that the special educator can play either an assistant role or implement a co-teaching approach together with the general teacher in a co-taught class. In contrast, American support teachers surveyed by King-Sears et al. (2020) claimed that, as co-teachers, they occupy a position equal to that of general teachers. However, some differences in implementing their role were noticed by the students. Students with and without disabilities indicated that although both general and special education teachers support their learning (e.g., provide assistance, answer questions), the special educator explains the content in a differentiated way (King-Sears et al., 2020; Szumski, 2022). A systematic review of the literature suggests that both

teachers negotiate methods of collaborative teaching and thus co-create an inclusive education pedagogy in an inclusive class (Miller et al., 2020).

However, some studies indicate the gap between the theoretical assumptions of inclusive education and their practical implementation in a co-taught class. According to Ghedin and Aquario (2020), the general teachers work primarily with students without disabilities, while the support teachers provide assistance primarily to students with disabilities. They usually try to do it in a non-disruptive manner, demonstrating the prevalence of the model “one teach – one assist” (Bombińska-Domżał, 2012). This may be justified by the expertise of the special educator and the significant increase in student needs, but, on the other hand, may consequently lead to stigmatization of more challenging students with SEN.

### **The scope of cooperation between two teachers**

Zamkowska (2017) depicts the collaboration of the support teacher with the general teacher in different roles: assessor, educator, tutor, therapist, promoter of inclusive activities, co-organizer, consultant and advisor. Collaborative tasks most often comprise joint planning and facilitation of differentiated instruction with the general teacher, which may include co-teaching or modelling (Mofield, 2020). Areas of collaboration between the general teacher and the support teacher most often include discussing students’ successes and challenges, creating and evaluating IEPs, adapting teaching materials, and consultation. The least frequent collaboration takes the form of informal conversations about students with SEN or the demands placed on them (Zaorska, 2022). The tasks of the special educator undertaken in collaboration with the general teacher also refer to arranged collaboration between students, such as peer coaching (Ackerman et al., 2023).

Pozas and Letzel-Alta’s (2023) study shows that teachers are most likely to use less demanding and less intensive collaborative practices, i.e., those such as exchanging teaching materials and information related to teaching content. More demanding collaborative practices, such as synchronization and co-creation, are significantly related to the varied teaching methods used by teachers. Teachers surveyed by Rytivaar et al. (2023) used more advanced practices in getting to know their students. They observed them together, thus co-constructing knowledge about their skills and needs. The teachers’ shared learning led to shared responsibility for the students and a better understanding of their diversity. Sharing knowledge about students reduced their workload and was beneficial for both teachers and students.

The important role of student observation and diagnosis in the cooperation between general teachers and support teachers was also highlighted by Oleńska-Pawlak and Bombińska-Domżał (2012). They found out that the accurate diagnosis of students allows for the planning of joint activities. Knowing the abilities and challenges of their students, teachers can plan lessons together, including choosing ready-made materials or creating their own adequate to the students' needs.

Cooperation between the subject teacher and the support teacher is effective in schools where the special educator is assigned to the subject rather than to the class. This allows both teachers to jointly plan the content, methods and forms of teaching and prepare additional teaching supports (Bombińska-Domżał, 2012). The subject teachers and support teachers surveyed by Skura (2018) pointed out the importance of the mutual exchange of expertise. Support teachers need input in terms of teaching and subject knowledge, while subject teachers need guidance on how best to work with students with special educational needs.

According to a study by Pancsofar and Petroff (2016), teachers do not always use collaborative teaching models that involve shared responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessment. The extent of collaboration depends on organizational factors such as the number of teachers and students they work with and professional development opportunities. Support teachers who have more regular contact with general teachers and work with fewer of them at the same time are more likely to engage in collaborative planning and teaching. Teachers who have more professional development opportunities in collaborative teaching are more likely to undertake tasks that require more collaboration. In addition, teachers who have positive attitudes towards collaboration are more likely to undertake tasks that require more commitment from both parties.

Occasionally, there are also situations that indicate a lack of good collaboration. This is the case when the support teacher does not take the initiative to actively participate in adapting materials to the content presented to the entire class, and his/her contribution is limited only to disciplining students with special educational needs if their behavior impedes the work of the teacher and other students in a class (Bartuś, 2023).

## **Methods**

The results of the above-mentioned international studies demonstrate the complex nature of the support teacher's tasks carried out in collaboration with the general teacher. These are diagnostic, educational, therapeutic, cooperative and advisory tasks. In the literature, only a few reports show the frequency with

which support teachers carry them out. The aim of the research presented in this paper is therefore to analyze the scope and frequency with which support teachers collaborate with general teachers in diagnostic, planning, organizational and educational tasks, their satisfaction with collaboration and difficulties encountered, and their determinants. The following determinants were included in the analysis: level of special education qualifications, professional ranks, opportunities for training in service and participation in training. The research problems to achieve this objective were formulated in the form of the following questions:

1. What is the scope and frequency of the tasks performed by the support teacher carried out in collaboration with the general teacher in primary school classes?
2. Are the support teachers satisfied with their collaboration with the general teacher?
3. Do the support teachers experience difficulties in their cooperation with the general teacher?
4. Does the level of qualifications and professional rank of the teachers surveyed differentiate the frequency with which they perform these tasks?
5. Do opportunities for in-service training and participation in training influence the frequency with which they perform these tasks?

The survey instrument was a scale targeted at support teachers of Polish inclusive and integrated primary schools. The scale consisted of 50 closed and demographic questions (regarding age, qualifications, length of service, professional ranks and qualifications in special education), of which 19 were used for the purposes of this article. The closed questions were classified into blocks depending on the nature of the tasks performed by the support teacher. Tasks of a diagnostic-planning, organizational, didactic and educational nature were distinguished. The answers to closed questions refer to the frequency of completion of a task and consists of a four-point Likert scale: never, rarely, sometimes, always.

The survey was conducted online between April 2021 and December 2023 using the Forms platform. A request to complete the questionnaire was posted to social media groups for support teachers. A total of 224 responses were received from respondents. Finally, a total of 200 questionnaires were analyzed. The largest age group consisted of teachers aged 30-40 years old (n=86, 43%), teachers with short seniority, i.e., up to 5 years (n=84, 42%), contract (n=71, 35.5%) and appointed (n=55, 27.5%) teachers. The vast majority obtained their qualification in special education from postgraduate studies (n=141, 70.5%). All respondents were employed in Polish primary schools. The differences in numbers between the groups of younger respondents with shorter work experience, lower professional rank and lower qualifications and older certified teachers

with longer work experience and higher education in special education are due to the relatively recent introduction of the compulsory employment of a support teacher in a class with a student with autism spectrum disorders (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 1309), as well as the possibility of obtaining the special educator qualification in a shorter period of time, i.e. within a three-semester postgraduate study.

Table 1.  
*Characteristics of the sample*

Variable	N	%
<b>AGE OF RESPONDENTS</b>		
Less than 30	42	21,00
30-40	86	43,00
41 and over	57	28,50
Over 50	15	7,50
<b>LENGTH OF SERVICE</b>		
Up to 5 years	84	42,00
6-10 years	48	24,00
11 years and more	68	34,00
<b>PROFESSIONAL RANK</b>		
Trainee/early career teacher	52	26,00
Contract teacher	71	35,50
Appointed teacher	55	27,50
Certified teacher	22	11,00
<b>QUALIFICATIONS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION</b>		
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
Post-graduate in special education	141	70,50
Bachelor's / complementary master's and postgraduate degree in special education	7	3,50

Source: own research.

Due to the use of an ordinal scale, the data was described by providing counts (N) and percentages (%), and when comparing the data, the Spearman correlation was used. The statistical significance of differences was expressed as the p-value, which constitutes the lowest level of significance at which the hypothesis is rejected. The differences are considered significant for  $p < 0.05$ . The Statistica package was used for statistical analysis of the results.

## Results

Support teachers were asked to specify the frequency of their collaboration with the general teacher on diagnostic and planning, organizational, teaching and behavior/class management tasks.

### Co-diagnosing and co-planning

Effective collaboration is based on joint diagnosis and planning. Table 2 shows the results of the frequency of the joint execution of these tasks.

Table 2.  
*Frequency of co-diagnosing and co-planning*

Factors	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Together with the general teacher, I make an initial assessment of the SEN pupil's needs and abilities.	135 (67,5)	39 (19,5)	18 (9)	8(4)	200 (100)
We meet with the general teacher to consult on joint activities	106 (53)	70 (35)	17 (8,5)	7 (3,5)	200 (100)
We agree with the general teacher to adapt the lesson to the needs of students with SEN	117 (58,50)	66 (33)	12 (6)	5 (2,50)	200 (100)
We expand the objectives of the lesson to include therapeutic goals	59 (29,65)	77 (38,69)	38 (19,1)	25 (12,56)	199 (100)
Together with the general teacher, we establish class behavior rules	118 (59)	58 (29)	17 (9)	6 (3)	199 (100)

Source: own research.

Joint diagnosis and planning involve a number of specific activities. Most of the teachers under consideration undertake them jointly with the general teacher. More than half of the respondents make an initial assessment of the SEN pupil's needs and abilities together with general teachers (67.5%), meet with them to consult on joint activities (52%), agree with them on adapting lessons to the needs of pupils with SEN (58.50%) and on classroom behavior rules (59%). In contrast, support teachers plan therapeutic goals together with the general teacher rather sometimes (38.69%) than always (29.65%). This may be because it is believed that the special educators have the relevant expertise and that they are responsible for planning therapeutic objectives and activities.



Table 3 presents the results of correlation analysis between the frequency of co-diagnostic and co-planning tasks and the respondents' qualifications, professional rank, professional development opportunities, and participation in training.

Table 3.  
*Cooperation in co-planning and variables*

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
Together with the general teacher, I make an initial assessment of the SEN pupil's needs and abilities.	0.859	0.307	0.072	0.107
We meet with the general teacher to consult on joint activities	0.413	0.071	0.034*	0.124
We agree with the general teacher to adapt the lesson to the needs of students with SEN	0.121	0.141	0.010*	0.041*
We expand the objectives of the lesson to include therapeutic goals	0.768	0.704	0.000***	0.026*
Together with the general teacher, we establish class behavior rules	0.208	0.877	0.326	0.883

\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$

Source: own research.

A significant positive, but weak, correlation was found between consultation on collaborative activities and professional development opportunities ( $p = 0.034$ ,  $r = 0.150$ ). Similarly, a positive, but very, weak correlation was also found between consultation with teachers to adapt lessons to the needs of students with special educational needs and professional development opportunities ( $p = 0.010$ ,  $r = 0.081$ ) and respondents' participation in training ( $p = 0.041$ ,  $r = 0.045$ ). A positive weak correlation also occurred between collaborative design of therapeutic goals and professional development opportunities ( $p = 0.000$ ,  $r = 0.263$ ) and participation in training ( $p = 0.026$ ,  $r = 0.158$ ). The support teachers who are more interested in their professional development are more likely to consult with the classroom teacher on joint activities, collaborate on adapting lessons to meet the needs of students with SEN, and expand lesson objectives to include therapeutic goals.

Organizational matters are the shared responsibility of general and support teacher. The frequency of these activities is shown below.

Table 4.  
*Frequency of co-organizing*

Factors	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
We jointly agree on the initial principles of cooperation	141 (70,50)	46 (23)	11 (5,50)	2 (1)	200 (100)
The rules of cooperation are respected by both parties	102 (51)	81 (40,5)	16 (8)	1 (0,5)	200 (100)
We fill out the documentation together	96 (48)	55 (28)	27 (14)	20 (10)	198(100)
We jointly decorate the classroom and are responsible for it	95 (47,74)	58 (29)	25 (13)	21 (11)	199 (100)
We jointly develop cooperation between parents of students with and without disabilities	106 (54)	68 (34)	16 (8)	8 (4)	198 (100)

Source: own research.

As can be seen from the data presented in the table above, the majority of teachers (70.50%) jointly set preliminary rules for cooperation. These rules are not always respected by both sides, although slightly more than half of the respondents (51%) indicated the answer “always”, but as many as 40.5% of them chose the answer “sometimes”. This issue should be a subject of action to improve mutual cooperation. Similar responses were received to questions about joint submission of documents and organization of classrooms. Slightly fewer than half respondents (nearly 48%) always undertake these activities jointly, while nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  sometimes cooperate in this regard, and nearly  $\frac{1}{4}$  rarely or never do so.

Table 5 shows the results of correlations between the frequency of organizational tasks and respondents' qualifications, professional rank, professional development opportunities, and participation in training.

Table 5.  
*Cooperation in co-organizing and variables*

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
We jointly agree on the initial principles of cooperation	0.543	0.039*	0.568	0.356
The rules of cooperation are respected by both parties	0.888	0.938	0.382	0.922

Table 5.  
*Cooperation in co-organizing and variables (cont.)*

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
We fill out the documentation together	0.765	0.162	0.000***	0.014*
We jointly decorate the classroom and are responsible for it	0.536	0.450	0.659	0.870
We jointly develop cooperation between parents of students with and without disabilities	0.444	0.120	0.176	0.090

\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$

Source: own research.

A significant positive, but weak, correlation was found between setting initial rules for teacher collaboration and professional rank ( $p = 0.039$ ,  $r = 0.146$ ). A positive weak correlation also occurred between collaborative filing of documents and professional development opportunities ( $p = 0.000$ ,  $r = 0.253$ ) as well as respondents' participation in training ( $p = 0.014$ ,  $r = 0.174$ ). Teachers with higher levels of professional advancement are more likely to set initial rules for collaboration, and teachers more involved in professional development are more likely to complete the documentation jointly with the general teacher.

Planning is the basis of collaborative teaching. The table below shows teachers' responses regarding the frequency of co-teaching tasks.

Table 6.  
*Frequency of co-teaching*

Factors	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
I conduct classes together with the class teacher	52 (26)	70 (36)	36 (18)	39 (20)	197 (100)
We analyze the learning challenges of SEN students together with the class teacher on an ongoing basis	140 (70)	44 (22)	14 (7)	2 (1)	200 (100)
We use cooperative learning strategies together	127 (63,50)	54 (27)	14 (7)	5 (2,50)	200 (100)
We jointly evaluate students' progress	124 (62)	52 (26)	15 (8)	8 (4)	199 (100)

Source: own research.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 6, most teachers always jointly analyze the learning challenges of students with special educational needs on an ongoing basis (70%), develop strategies for collaborative learning (63.50%), and evaluate students' progress (62%). However, teachers do not always teach together. More than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of them implement co-teaching sometimes, more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  always, and as many as 38% do it rarely or not at all. Table 7 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the frequency of implementing cooperative teaching and the respondents' qualifications, professional rank, professional development opportunities, and participation in training.

Table 7.  
Cooperation in co-teaching and variables

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
I conduct classes together with the class teacher	0,246	0,958	0,030	0,005
We analyze the learning challenges of SEN students together with the class teacher on an ongoing basis	0,359	0,013	0,264	0,553
We use cooperative learning strategies together	0,085	0,190	0,672	0,013
We jointly evaluate students' progress	0,784	0,161	0,389	0,139

\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$

Source: own research.

There is a significant positive, but weak, correlation between co-teaching and professional development opportunities ( $p = 0.030$ ,  $r = 0.155$ ) as well as respondents' participation in training ( $p = 0.005$ ,  $r = 0.199$ ). Similarly, there is a positive weak correlation between the frequency of using jointly collaborative learning strategies and respondents' participation in training ( $p = 0.013$ ,  $r = 0.176$ ). Teachers who invest in professional development are more likely to engage in more advanced collaborative practices involving co-teaching and the use of collaborative learning strategies. In addition, a positive weak correlation was detected between the joint ongoing analysis of learning challenges of students with special educational needs and professional rank ( $p = 0.013$ ,  $r = 0.175$ ). Teachers with higher professional ranks are more likely to undertake these activities together.

Teaching activities are closely correlated with childcare. Table 8 presents the frequency of teachers' cooperation in the implementation of behavior/class management tasks.

Table 8.  
Frequency of behavior/class management tasks

Factors	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
We analyze on an ongoing basis the behavioral problems of students with SEN together with the class teacher	148 (74)	40 (20)	12(6)	0 (0)	200 (100)
We jointly shape the positive climate of the class	161 (80,50)	32 (16)	7 (3,50)	0 (0)	200 (100)
We jointly determine the methods of shaping positive and eliminating negative behavior of students with SEN.	138 (69,7)	38 (19,19)	18 (9,09)	4 (2,02)	198 (100)

Source: own research.

Most of the surveyed support teachers undertake behavior/class management tasks in cooperation with the general teacher. They always jointly analyze the behavioral problems of students with special educational needs (74%), shape a positive classroom climate (80.50%), and establish methods for shaping positive and eliminating negative behavior of students with SEN (67.7%).

Table 9 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the frequency of implementation of behavior/class management tasks and the respondents' qualifications, professional rank, professional development opportunities, and participation in training.

Table 9.  
Cooperation in mentoring- upbringing and variables

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
We analyze on an ongoing basis the behavioral problems of students with SEN together with the class teacher	0,589	0,003**	0,253	0,149
We jointly shape the positive climate of the class	0,125	0,008**	0,229	0,140

Table 9.  
*Cooperation in mentoring- upbringing and variables (cont.)*

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
We jointly determine the methods of shaping positive and eliminating negative behavior of students with SEN.	0,897	0,990	0,427	0,200

\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$

Source: own research.

A significant positive, but weak, correlation was found between jointly analyzing the behavioral challenges of students with SEN ( $p = 0.003$ ,  $r = 0.207$ ) as well as jointly shaping a positive classroom climate ( $p = 0.008$ ,  $r = 0.188$ ) and professional rank. Teachers with higher professional ranks are more likely to jointly analyze the behavioral challenges of students with SEN and shape a positive climate of the class together.

The degree of satisfaction of support teachers in cooperation with the general teacher and the frequency of difficulties in this cooperation were also analyzed. The results are presented in the table below.

Table 10.  
*Frequency of satisfaction with cooperation and experiencing difficulties*

Factors	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
I am satisfied with the cooperation with the general teacher	<b>126 (63,32)</b>	52 (26,13)	18 (9,05)	3 (1,51)	199 (100)
I experience difficulties in cooperating with the general teacher	30 (15)	<b>56 (28)</b>	44 (22)	<b>70 (35)</b>	200 (100)

Source: own research.

The data presented in the table above shows that the majority of respondents are satisfied with their cooperation with the general teacher and never experience difficulties in this regard. It should also be noted that the group of teachers experiencing difficulties "sometimes" accounts for nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the respondents.

No significant correlations were found between satisfaction with cooperation and the respondents' qualifications, their professional rank, professional development opportunities, and participation in training.

Table 11.

*Frequency of satisfaction with cooperation and experiencing difficulties, and variables*

Factors	Qualification in special education	Professional rank	Professional development opportunities	Participation in training
I am satisfied with the cooperation with the general teacher	0,740	0,885	0.141	0,067
I experience difficulties in cooperating with the general teacher	0,313	0,498	0,142	0,058

\*  $p < 0,05$

\*\*  $p < 0,01$

\*\*\*  $p < 0,001$

Source: own research.

## Discussion

The research presented here indicates that most of the support teachers surveyed declared undertaking most of the tasks in cooperation with the general teachers. These include diagnostic and planning activities, namely, the initial assessment of the SEN student's needs and abilities, consulting on joint activities, adapting lessons to the needs of students with SEN, and setting classroom behavior rules. These findings are in line with other research showing that cooperation in observing and diagnosing students (Oleńska-Pawlak & Bombińska-Domzal, 2012) allows them to co-create knowledge about their abilities and needs (Rytivaara et al. (2023). Teachers studied by Bombińska-Domzal (2012), Mofield (2020), and Zaorska (2022) most often jointly developed and evaluated Individual Educational Plans, planned to adapt the lessons to students' special educational needs by agreeing on the content discussed, the methods and forms of work, and preparing additional teaching aids. A significant correlation was observed between involvement in joint planning and involvement in professional development. Similar to the results of Pancsofar and Petroff's (2016) study, teachers who are more likely to take advantage of professional development opportunities are more likely to engage in collaborative planning as well.

The authors' research has proven that most support teachers jointly set initial rules for collaboration, but do not always respect them. Other organizational activities are also not always undertaken together. This includes completing the

documentation and organizing classes. For teachers supporting students from different higher-grade classes, the lack of a complete commitment to cooperating with each subject teacher may be due to the need to work with several teachers during courses conducted in different classrooms. Working with students from different grades and changing classrooms is a demanding organizational task. It also makes it difficult for support teachers to participate in the co-organization of work in each of these classes. In such a situation, the class teacher may feel more obliged to complete the documentation and care for his/her own class. This difficulty was pointed out in the study by Pancsofar and Petroff (2016). Further research presented in this article shows that participation in joint organizational activities is positively related to the level of professional rank and commitment to professional development. This indicates the importance of raising awareness of the need and capacity to cooperate in the field of organizational tasks.

The majority of the teachers concerned always engage in joint teaching activities, continuously analyzing the learning challenges of students with special educational needs, using collaborative learning strategies and assessing the progress of students, which is consistent with the results of the Zaorska study (2022). However, they do not always co-teach. Teachers who invest in professional development are more likely to engage in more advanced collaborative practices involving joint instruction and the use of cooperative learning strategies. Moreover, teachers with higher professional ranks are more likely to jointly analyze the learning challenges of students with special educational needs on an ongoing basis. This finding is in line with Pancsofar and Petroff's (2016) research. They detected a correlation between the use of professional development opportunities and the use of more advanced collaboration models. According to Pancsofar and Petroff (2016), teachers who are more engaged in professional development are more likely to undertake tasks that require more collaboration, such as collaborative classroom management, collaborative learning strategies, and collaborative assessment.

As the analysis shows, most respondents perform behavior/class management tasks together with the general teacher. In this regard, cooperation is particularly recognized by teachers of higher professions. Studies by other authors confirm this, indicating that the scope of significant cooperation between teachers is the discussion of challenges in students' behavior and the organization of peer support (Zaorska, 2022; Ackerman, 2023).

The majority of respondents are satisfied with the cooperation with the general teacher and never experience difficulties in this regard. In contrast, the results of a study by Vostal et al. (2022) indicated that general and special educators experienced difficulties in building relational trust. The suggested solution to this problem is to promote equality of roles between both teachers and develop norms to support their cooperation.



## Limitations of the study

The research presented in this article has some limitations. Firstly, the survey included a small, although nationwide, group of 224 respondents. The survey was voluntary, so the questionnaire was only completed by those interested in it. Furthermore, not all questionnaires were filled in correctly, bringing the number of respondents to 200. To standardize the group, questionnaires completed by pre-school teachers were not included in the analysis. Secondly, other variables are worth considering in correlation analysis, such as the level of education, the type of disability of the student and the type of institution (public, non-public) or its location (urban, rural school). Thirdly, surveys should be interpreted with caution because they have the characteristics of subjective statements by respondents.

## Conclusion

According to the survey, most diagnostic, organizational, and educational tasks are carried out by support teachers in cooperation with the general teacher. Only selected activities are undertaken in cooperation with less frequency. This applies to the appointment of therapeutic lesson objectives, which are only sometimes carried out jointly, as well as conducting lessons together. This indicates the need to make the general teachers aware of the need to accomplish during their lessons not only educational, but also therapeutic goals, and to prepare both teachers to conduct lessons together. Most of the respondents are satisfied with their cooperation with the general teacher and never experience difficulties in this regard. Teachers' professional development, understood as participation in training courses and obtaining higher professional ranks, positively correlates with setting and adhering to the rules of cooperation, joint discussion of educational challenges, the shaping of a positive classroom climate, and the use of support teachers of more advanced forms of cooperation, such as joint planning and co-teaching. It is therefore postulated that the topic of cooperative teaching should become the subject of training for both active and prospective teachers as well.

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## Współpraca pedagogów specjalnych z nauczycielami szkół podstawowych: Badanie polskich nauczycieli

### Streszczenie

Współpraca nauczyciela wspomagającego z nauczycielem klasy w klasie integracyjnej i włączającej jest jednym z wyznaczników powodzenia tych form. Celem badania jest analiza zakresu i częstotliwości ich współpracy w realizacji zadań diagnostycznych, planistycznych, organizacyjnych i wychowawczych, a także satysfakcji ze współpracy i doświadczanych wyzwań. Analizowano także korelację tych zmiennych z kwalifikacjami nauczycieli, ich stopniem awansu zawodowego, dostępnością doskonalenia zawodowego i korzystaniem ze szkoleń. Próba 200 polskich nauczycieli współorganizujących kształcenie w szkołach podstawowych została przebadana za pomocą kwestionariusza on-line. Wyniki pokazują, że większość zadań respondentów obejmuje współpracę z nauczycielem klas. Co więcej, ich rozwój zawodowy koreluje pozytywnie z częstotliwością wykonywania tych zadań. Większość respondentów uznała tę współpracę za satysfakcjonującą i nigdy nie doświadczyła trudności w tym zakresie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** współnauczanie, szkoła podstawowa, edukacja włączająca, kształcenie integracyjne, nauczyciel współorganizujący kształcenie.