



**“As a Shadow” – the Experiences of a Support Teacher
 of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)**
**„Ja jako cień” – doświadczenia nauczyciela
 współorganizującego kształcenie ucznia z zaburzeniami
 ze spektrum autyzmu (ASD)**

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The objective of this article is to explore the experiences, challenges, and pedagogical strategies employed by teachers who co-facilitate the education of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The central research question addresses the experiences and challenges faced by teachers who co-facilitate the education of students with ASD. Data were gathered through in-depth narrative interviews with three active teachers working with ASD students.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The study's objective and research question are addressed through a structured argument, consisting of an introduction to inclusive education for students with ASD and the role of support teachers. This is followed by a comparative presentation and analysis of the teachers' experiences in co-facilitating ASD education.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The analyses reveal that teachers co-facilitating the education of students with ASD are aware of the unique needs of each student, developed through direct experience. Their role involves tailoring their approach to the changing needs of students at different educational stages, ranging from supporting daily activities to assisting with learning and social skills development.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: There is a need to implement concrete measures for expanding psychological support for parents of children with ASD. Given the rising prevalence of this disorder, it is essential to enhance the knowledge, skills, and competencies of society, especially educational staff – to better support individuals with ASD.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, SUPPORT TEACHER, AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD), SPECIAL EDUCATION, INDIVIDUALIZED TEACHING**

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STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest poznanie doświadczeń i identyfikacja wyzwań i strategii pedagogicznych stosowanych przez nauczycieli współorganizujących kształcenie uczniów z zaburzeniami ze spektrum autyzmu (ASD).

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Wiodącym problemem badawczym jest pytanie o to, jakie są doświadczenia i wyzwania nauczycieli współorganizujących kształcenie uczniów z ASD. Zgromadzone materiały źródłowe uzyskano dzięki przeprowadzeniu pogłębionych wywiadów narracyjnych z trzema aktywnymi nauczycielami współorganizującymi kształcenie uczniów z ASD.

PROCES WYWODU: Realizacja celu i odpowiedzi na pytanie problemowe została ujęta w procesie wywodu złożonego z wprowadzenia w zagadnienie edukacji włączającej uczniów z ASD i roli nauczycieli współorganizujących ich kształcenie oraz zaprezentowania porównawczej analizy doświadczeń nauczycieli współorganizujących kształcenie uczniów z ASD.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Prezentowane analizy pokazują, że nauczyciele współorganizujący kształcenie uczniów z ASD zauważają unikalne potrzeby każdego dziecka, poznawane poprzez bezpośrednie doświadczenie. Rola nauczyciela polega na dostosowywaniu działań do zmieniających się potrzeb uczniów na różnych poziomach edukacji – od wsparcia w codziennych czynnościach po pomoc w nauce i rozwijaniu kompetencji społecznych.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Istnieje potrzeba wprowadzenia realnych działań w zakresie upowszechnienia pomocy psychologicznej rodzicom dzieci z ASD. W obliczu coraz częstszego występowania tego zaburzenia należy rozwijać wiedzę, umiejętności i kompetencje całego społeczeństwa, a zwłaszcza pracowników placówek edukacyjnych, aby skutecznie wspierać funkcjonowanie osób z ASD.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** EDUKACJA INKLUZYJNA, NAUCZYCIEL WSPÓLORGANIZUJĄCY KSZTAŁCENIE, ZABURZENIA ZE SPEKTRUM AUTYZMU (ASD), KSZTAŁCENIE SPECJALNE, INDYWIDUALIZACJA NAUCZANIA

Introduction

Modern educational systems are increasingly required to meet the diverse needs of students, and the rising number of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnoses presents a unique challenge. Current estimates suggest that ASD affects approximately 1–2% of the child population, making it one of the most commonly diagnosed neurodevelopmental disorders (Schendel et al., 2012). The condition is marked by difficulties in social interactions, communication, and a tendency toward repetitive or excessive patterns of behavior (Pisula, 2020). In response to the specific needs of students with ASD, educational strategies have been developed to reshape inclusive education approaches and adapt teaching methods accordingly.

The Charter of Rights for People with Autism, adopted on July 12, 2013, states that individuals with autism are “entitled to easily accessible, free, and appropriate education tailored to the abilities and needs of students with autism” (Uchwała..., 2013, Article 3). Additionally, the Ministry of National Education’s regulation from July 24, 2015, guarantees that students with disabilities, including those with ASD, have the right to attend various educational institutions (Rozporządzenie..., 2015; Rozporządzenie..., 2017b). Since January 1, 2016, schools have been required to employ teachers with qualifications in special education – known as support teachers – whose role is to assist in organizing the education of students with autism (Rozporządzenie..., 2015, §8). The Ministry of National Education’s regulation from August 9, 2017, further specifies that support teachers, also referred to as shadow teachers, collaborate with other educators, provide direct support to students with disabilities, assist in selecting appropriate teaching methods and tools, and lead additional activities tailored to the individual needs of students (Rozporządzenie..., 2017a, §7.7).

While the roles and responsibilities of support teachers have been discussed in the literature (Apanel, 2016; Bobińska-Domżał, 2014; Gołubiew, 2001; Gorajewska, 2009; Lipińska-Lokś, 2013; Puda, 2022; Wojciechowska, 2021; Zamkowska, 2017; Zamkowska & Nogaj, 2024; Zamkowska & Snopek, 2017), we should continue to update and expand our understanding of the various strategies employed by these educators to identify the most effective methods for working with students on the autism spectrum (ASD). Gaining insights into the perspectives and challenges faced by teachers can lead to more tailored support and professional training, ultimately improving pedagogical practices and informing recommendations for the educational system. Such research can generate actionable, practical suggestions that respond to the real-world needs of both teachers and students with ASD, thereby improving the quality of education while adapting to its local and cultural contexts. Given these considerations, this study aims to investigate teachers’ experiences and to identify both the challenges and the instructional strategies they employ when supporting students with ASD.

Research Focus

The central question of how support teachers perceive and evaluate their roles in fulfilling their pedagogical duties is encapsulated in the main research problem: What are the experiences and challenges encountered by support teachers working with students on the autism spectrum (ASD)?

To examine this central issue, the following detailed research questions have been formulated:

1. What are the experiences of teachers when they first interact with students diagnosed with ASD?
2. What essential skills and competencies are required for effectively performing the role of a support teacher for students with ASD?

3. How do support teachers view their role in the educational process for students with ASD?
4. Which teaching strategies and methods are most frequently employed and considered effective in working with students on the spectrum?
5. What programs and projects help promote the integration of students with ASD into peer groups?
6. How do support teachers collaborate with other educators, specialists, and the parents of students with ASD?
7. What obstacles do support teachers face in their work with ASD students, and how do they assess their overall job satisfaction?
8. What recommendations do support teachers have for educational authorities overseeing the implementation of inclusive education?

Research Procedure

The research problem inspired the use of a qualitative research strategy grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which promotes a flexible approach and the ability to craft research questions without the constraints of standardization (Konecki, 2000; Rubacha, 2008; Silverman, 2009; Urbaniak-Zajęc, 2008). Qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of complex, previously misunderstood facts and hidden aspects of educational practices and realities (Rubacha, 2003; Urbaniak-Zajęc, 2008).

To explore the experiences and personal narratives of support teachers working with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with three teachers. This biographical approach provided insights into their personal experiences and general perspectives (Smolińska-Theiss & Theiss, 2010; Kvale, 2012; Silverman, 2023). Throughout the study, ethical standards were upheld. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their involvement, confidentiality, and about how their data would be used (Flick, 2012).

Participants

The study, conducted between May and June 2024, utilized narrative-based interviews to capture participants' professional experiences. The questions were designed to scrutinize key aspects of their work histories, in line with the study's research objectives.

The sample selection was purposeful, focusing on teachers with significant experience related to the study's goals (Flick, 2012, p. 139). The final sample consisted of three support teachers working with ASD students across various levels of mainstream education, representing institutions in cities of different sizes.

The first participant, a female teacher, has worked for two years as a support educator in a public preschool in a regional capital city. She assists a 6-year-old boy with

ASD who, due to developmental delays, is placed in a group of 4-year-olds. In addition to her teaching role, she is pursuing a master’s degree in early childhood and preschool education.

The second participant, also female, began her role as a support teacher for a second-grade boy with ASD at a rural public elementary school at the start of the school year. She has prior experience in both an inclusive preschool and a public elementary school. She holds a degree in education, has completed training in Special Education for Intellectual Disabilities, and has pursued postgraduate studies in supporting individuals with autism.

The third participant, a male teacher, has served as a support educator for three years, working with a sixth-grade student with ASD in a rural public elementary school. He holds a degree in special education for individuals with intellectual disabilities and is currently advancing his qualifications through postgraduate studies in education and therapy for individuals on the autism spectrum. His background also includes experience in an inclusive preschool, a special education school, and a special educational and care center.

Comparative Analysis of the Experiences of Support Teachers Working With ASD Students

Initial Challenges in Engaging Students With ASD

Support teachers who began working with students with ASD frequently encountered various early challenges, particularly in managing student behavior. The first teacher described her initial difficulty with a young boy who showed minimal engagement, avoided eye contact, and struggled with verbal communication. She identified these issues as priorities in the therapeutic process. The second teacher worked with a student accustomed to disruptive behaviors from the previous school year. This boy would often interrupt lessons or leave the classroom to spend time in the library or with a counselor. Although restructuring these patterns and introducing new rules initially met with resistance, the teacher’s consistency eventually led to positive changes. The third teacher struggled to build rapport with his student, who at first was reluctant to work with him: “It was tough at times, he would shout: ‘I’m not working with him! I don’t want him around! He can’t sit with me!’”

Key Competencies for Effective Support of Students With ASD

The first teacher emphasized the importance of long-term planning, such as the lengthy process of toilet training, as well as the need for flexibility in accommodating the child’s sudden mood swings. She stressed the value of a vigilant, supportive presence that avoids placing excessive demands on the student.

The other teachers echoed the importance of empathy, particularly during moments of crisis when students may express frustration or exhaustion in socially inappropriate ways due to their limited social skills. Being open to the student's perspective enables the teacher to better understand the challenges they face and to build stronger connections that ultimately enhance support. The teacher working with the second grader pointed out his susceptibility to rapid fatigue and described the importance of adjusting the pace of work to the child's energy levels rather than expecting them to keep up with the rest of the class. Meanwhile, the teacher supporting the sixth grader stressed that it is important to respect the student's autonomy by offering assistance while always prefacing it with a question about whether they wanted help, rather than assuming it. This approach enables teachers to meet the student's needs without diminishing their motivation or exacerbating feelings of helplessness and the sense of being overwhelmed.

All teachers agreed on the need to tailor the educational process to each student's unique needs and maintain open, authentic communication with parents. They also unanimously stressed the value of ongoing professional development, particularly through specialized training.

The Role of the Support Teacher for Students With ASD

Support teachers for students with ASD fulfill duties in accordance with special education laws and regulations. Their goal is to be a subtle presence – available when needed but not overly intrusive.

Preschool Teacher:

- Educational Support: "We head to class, and he does his best to engage... I tend to sit slightly away from him, but when he's having a bad day, I make sure to sit right by his side."
- Hygiene Assistance: "I assist with even the simplest things... for instance, if he doesn't receive the instruction 'wash your hands,' he'll just stand in the bathroom, spinning in circles."
- Social Skills Development: "We work on building independence... like knowing when to greet others and shake hands. At lunch, he sits with the other children and has his own spot at the table."
- Mealtime Independence: "He usually unpacks his breakfast on his own, and learns how to place his plate and cup... he also helps me set up the cups and plates before lunch."
- Emotional Support: "Once, I left the room without letting him know, and he started screaming... he feels secure with my presence and knows that I'm there to support him when needed."

Early Elementary Teacher:

- Primary Responsibilities: "My duties involve supporting the student's progress through the curriculum, helping him integrate with his classmates, collaborating

closely with the lead teacher, developing the Functional Support Plan (FSP) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP), and conducting one-on-one social rehabilitation sessions and social skills training.”

- Daily Support: “I read longer texts to him, help him understand what he’s reading, paying attention to spelling, select tasks for him, explain instructions, keep a communication notebook, motivate him to stay engaged, and help him manage his emotions.”

Teacher at the Upper Elementary Level:

- Support: “I support him, sometimes help him pack up, calm him down... but I’m careful not to let my presence become overwhelming.”
- Conversations: “I tell him, ‘I know it feels like you have two sides – part of you wants to run, shout, and disrupt, and another that wants to be engaged in class.’ I share examples of other children who face their own struggles but manage to cope, explaining that this is something everyone deals with, not just those on the spectrum.”

Effective Strategies and Approaches for Working With Students With ASD

Teachers interpret effective methods for working with students with ASD in different ways. For instance, the teacher of the youngest student stresses the importance of individualized strategies: “The most valuable experience comes from working directly with each child, as every case of autism is unique.” Respect for the student’s personal space is also essential: “We must be mindful to respect the child’s needs.”

The second-grade teacher employs specific methods: “I create an environment conducive to learning, offer clear instructions, minimize distractions, and adapt methods to the student’s specific abilities.” The teacher of the oldest student discusses managing emotional outbursts: “When he starts crying hysterically, I take him for a walk, help him calm down, and reduce the surrounding stimuli. Usually, after an hour, he’s ready to return to class and participate again.” This teacher also advises others by saying: “I explain that he needs a calm environment and avoid talking to him in these moments – I act as a shadow, watching over him while allowing him the freedom he requires.”

Teacher-Led Initiatives for Integrating Students With ASD Into the School Community

Teachers note the importance of helping students with ASD feel connected with their peers and broader school community. For the youngest student, one teacher explains, “Even when seated near other children, he doesn’t interact... They could try talking to him or even laugh at him, but he doesn’t respond... There are some people he likes, but if they come to say goodbye, he simply turns around and walks away.” She continues,

“Through play, we practice approaching others together; sometimes, I gently nudge him to encourage a farewell.” The teacher notes that, “In terms of building relationships, he has to feel a need for it and that need usually arises only when he wants something from others, like, ‘I need you because you have something for me.’ Sometimes, if a staff member sits beside him and tries to chat, he simply stands up and walks away.”

For the second-grade student, structured peer activities have proven beneficial. “The *Playtime with [Name]* project... where he and peers made simple educational toys together, was especially helpful,” the teacher explains. “He got to decide whom to invite to the activity and even made invitations himself.” Another initiative, *Playing with Our Senses*, has been equally successful: “He now addresses classmates by name... joins in during breaks, and has been accepted by the group.”

The oldest student also benefits from support in social interactions, and he can now initiate them on his own: “Students with autism need to learn how to function alongside other children and integrate. This doesn’t mean they shouldn’t have individual lessons; he does... But in other classes, he’s doing well, and I can see how open he’s become to interacting with others. During group work, he goes over to the other kids and wants to engage with them.” He continues, “Recently, he found a younger friend, and talking to him seems to have a calming effect... Though he sometimes enjoys being alone, it’s clear that social interactions genuinely make him happy.”

Collaboration Among Co-Teaching Teachers, School Specialists, and Parents of Students With ASD

Teachers note several challenges they encounter in collaborating with specialists. The preschool teacher shares, “Some activities had to be removed because specialists were hesitant to include him.” Nonetheless, she underscores the parents’ dedication: “They keep me in the loop on everything, and together, we find common solutions. I genuinely admire these parents because they truly do everything within their power.”

The early elementary level teacher describes her collaborative process: “We meet at least twice annually during team meetings, where we discuss the results of the Multi-Specialty Assessment of Student Functioning. Our focus is on developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Both the school and the Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Center work closely collaborate with me, as do the parents. I use a *Communication Log* to update them on daily happenings, academic progress, and behavioral concerns... They’re on board with my methods.” The teacher working with the oldest student recalls some initial resistance: “Other teachers felt uneasy about my presence, but I’m here to support them.” He emphasizes the importance of tailoring his approach: “I don’t always go along with the majority view, but I always act in the student’s best interests.” The trust he has established with the family is key: “His mom trusts me completely – I’m not just seen as a teacher but almost like a family friend.” He considers this strong rapport as essential to his work: “I work not only with the student but with his

family, who know that I am here to help.” Drawing on his experience, he adds, “Being a licensed foster parent helps me understand the struggles parents face when dealing with various disorders. Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and support tailored to their needs and abilities.”

Challenges and Fulfillment in the Role of Supporting Students With ASD

Teachers often emphasize how motivating students to engage in learning can be an ongoing challenge. With the youngest student, for instance, “praise or small rewards that would normally thrill most children hold no value for him.” The teacher admits feeling limited in her impact: “I know I’m giving him everything I can, but I can’t help feeling he could be further along.” She also points out how unappreciated this role can feel: “You’re putting in a level of dedication similar to parenting... but understanding or acknowledgment is rare.” She reflects, “There’s often no tangible reward by conventional measures; at times, there’s even a sense of powerlessness.” She concludes, “It teaches you to set priorities – the child is the priority in this work, not me.”

For early elementary school students, success depends on a range of factors, including “the day’s weather, the child’s interest, and their unique strengths and needs... it’s a tough job; it’s really important to build a trusting relationship, establish rapport, and remain patient, firm, and consistent.”

In any teaching situation, flexibility is key: “With rigid plans and big goals, don’t expect everything to go as planned. Professional courses and degrees can only take you so far. Most of all, you need to find empathy and patience within yourself and understand the perspective of someone with autism.”

Teachers point out specific moments that bring them joy and purpose in their roles. “For me, it was when my student participated in a Mother’s and Father’s Day event and danced the polonaise with a classmate,” recalls the second-grade teacher. Another finds a sense of pride and fulfillment when a student gains self-control: “He holds it together, and in those moments, I feel truly proud.”

Recommendations for Authorities Overseeing Inclusive Education From Teachers Supporting ASD Students

Teachers underscore the pressing need for increased psychological support for parents of children with ASD, which is currently accessible to only a select few: “There’s no free support available; considering how much therapy costs for their children, parents simply cannot afford to prioritize their own well-being. They are often exhausted, frustrated, drained, and judged by society.” Additionally, expanding the number of specialized facilities is crucial, as children with severe needs frequently end up in schools un-equipped to cater to them due to limited placements. Training teachers and other staff

on ASD is equally essential: “For many, it’s like another world, and the student seems like an outsider.” It is also necessary to raise awareness among society and among other parents: “Everyone, not just the support teacher, should know how to work with them; these children are not outsiders to be isolated, but remarkable children who may not function neurotypically but still need companionship, connection, and integration.”

Conclusions

Reviewing teachers’ insights into supporting ASD students reveals similarities and distinctions depending on educational stages. Teachers unanimously point to the difficulties they encounter when stepping into the role of a support teacher and the necessity of an individualized approach for each child, where direct experience and hands-on practice are invaluable. Motivating ASD students is challenging, especially when conventional incentives fall short. Teachers build their skills through further education and professional training, but daily classroom experience is priceless. Each child with ASD has specific needs that call for flexible methods and strategies.

Education levels:

Preschool: The youngest children need assistance with daily hygiene routines, and it is essential to provide them with a sense of security and stability.

Early Primary Education: Children benefit from support in actively participating in class activities and adjusting to classroom norms and expectations.

Upper Primary Education: Children focus on developing social skills and establishing friendships.

Teachers strive to work discreetly, staying “in the background” while being attentive to students’ signals and adjusting their strategies to children’s changing needs. However, this work is often complicated by low public awareness surrounding autism spectrum disorders, insufficient specialized training for staff, and the challenges of meeting specific student needs. Positive experiences often emerge from strong partnerships with parents, who appreciate the teachers’ commitment. Many educators see their work as a calling rather than simply a set of duties.

Qualitative studies shed light on the complexities of this role, and underscore the importance of educating both teaching professionals and the broader public to better understand and support individuals with ASD.

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