



Responsibilities of Special Education Teachers in Inclusive Education Zadania pedagoga specjalnego w edukacji włączającej – wybrane zagadnienia

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The purpose of this study is to look at the responsibilities of special education teachers within Poland's mainstream education system, while situating them within a broader comparative framework – specifically by examining the established role of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) in the British educational context.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The study deals with the issue of identifying the optimal range of responsibilities for the newly created role of special education teachers in Polish mainstream schools and preschools. These tasks are designed to meet the diverse needs of all children and students within these inclusive environments. To investigate this issue, the research employs a content analysis of relevant legal documents and conducts a comprehensive review of existing studies on the subject.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: At the heart of this study is a comparative analysis of the duties of special education teachers in Poland's mainstream education system, as codified in legal statutes, and those of their counterparts in the British system, particularly the SENCo role. Moreover, the study examines the responsibilities envisioned for the role of Inclusive Education Coordinators as outlined in the *Model of Education for All* framework.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The findings indicate that the duties assigned to special education teachers in Polish mainstream institutions are significantly broader in scope than those associated with SENCo in the British system.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: Given that the role of special education teachers was only introduced in the previous academic year, there

remains a significant gap in research on the actual implementation and efficacy of this position. One of the primary recommendations is to undertake more in-depth studies, with the potential to draw on the typologies of SENCo roles outlined in this paper to inform future research on the subject.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER, SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER ROLE IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS COORDINATOR (SENCO), INCLUSIVE EDUCATION COORDINATOR (KEW)**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem opracowania jest rozpoznanie założonych zadań pedagogów specjalnych funkcjonujących w polskim systemie edukacji ogólnodostępnej i rozpatrzenie ich w szerszym kontekście – doświadczeń ukonstytuowanych na funkcjonowaniu koordynatorów edukacji włączającej w brytyjskim systemie edukacyjnym.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Problem badawczy obejmuje zagadnienie optymalnego dobru zadań dla pedagoga pracującego na (nowym w polskim systemie edukacji) stanowisku pedagoga specjalnego w placówce ogólnodostępnej, formułowanych w aspekcie zróżnicowanych potrzeb wszystkich dzieci w przedszkolu lub uczniów w szkole ogólnodostępnej. W zbieraniu informacji została wykorzystana metoda analizy treści aktów prawnych oraz przegląd badań.

PROCES WYWODU: Meritum stanowi porównanie zadań pedagogów zatrudnionych na stanowiskach pedagogów specjalnych w placówce ogólnodostępnej zapisanych w akcie prawnym z zadaniami sformułowanymi dla osób pracujących na stanowiskach pokrewnych w brytyjskim systemie edukacji: Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) oraz projektowanych w modelu edukacji dla wszystkich: koordynatorów edukacji włączającej (KEW).

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Założone zadania wpisane w przydział czynności stanowiska pedagoga specjalnego w placówce ogólnodostępnej są szersze od zadań projektowanych dla koordynatorów specjalnych potrzeb edukacyjnych.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Ponieważ stanowisko pedagoga specjalnego zostało wdrożone w ubiegłym roku szkolnym, brakuje jeszcze obszernych i rzetelnych doniesień badawczych o jego rzeczywistej roli. Jedną z rekomendacji jest wskazanie potrzeby takich badań z możliwością wykorzystania typologii ról SENCo zaprezentowanych w opracowaniu.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **EDUKACJA WŁĄCZAJĄCA, PEDAGOG SPECJALNY, STANOWISKO PEDAGOGA SPECJALNEGO W SZKOLE OGÓLNOOSTĘPNEJ, SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS COORDINATOR (SENCO), KOORDYNATOR EDUKACJI WŁĄCZAJĄCEJ (KEW)**

Introduction

While inclusive education – often referred to as “education for all” – is a priority in the educational policies of many countries, the practical implementation of these policies does not always match their stated goals. One key reason for this gap is the inherent complexity of inclusive education itself (Allan, 2007; Gajdzica, 2020). Moreover, political trends frequently deprioritize inclusive education, pushing it further down the policy agenda (Engsig & Johnstone, 2014; Ydesen & Daniels, 2024), and the introduction of inclusive practices often encounters resistance within school communities (Guillemot et al., 2022). As a result, the successful and sustained implementation of inclusive education in mainstream schooling systems requires continuous institutional support from both central and local government agencies, community institutions, and all elements of the educational system (Haug, 2017).

One of many practical approaches to providing this institutional backing is the integration of special education teachers into mainstream schools. These educators fulfill a range of roles, and their tasks vary depending on the specific frameworks in place. However, the duties assigned to them are often a source of debate and controversy (e.g., Mackenzie, 2007; Gajdzica, 2011). The purpose of this study is to examine the roles and responsibilities of special education teachers in Poland’s mainstream education system. Additionally, this analysis places their roles in a broader context by comparing their experiences with those of inclusion coordinators in the British education system, thereby offering an international perspective on inclusive education.

The Role of the Special Education Teacher in Mainstream Education

In Poland, much like in many other countries, special education teachers play a crucial role in organizing educational processes, especially for students requiring additional support. These educators often work as co-teachers in both general and inclusive classrooms, facilitating the learning process for all students, with a focus on those with special needs (Friend et al., 2010; Fitzell, 2018; Gajdzica, 2013). They also hold positions as Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) (Fisher, 2012; Gajdzica, 2022). While the co-teaching aspect of their role falls beyond the scope of this paper, we center on their responsibilities as SENCos, or broadly speaking, in the area of inclusive education coordination.

In Poland, the position of a Special Educational Needs Coordinator has not yet been formally recognized by law. However, the role of Inclusive Education Coordinator (koordynator edukacji włączającej, or KEW) has been mentioned in two key documents developed under the auspices of the Ministry of National Education. An initial reference to the KEW appeared in a working document titled *Supporting the Improvement of Inclusive Education Quality in Poland* (MEN, 2020b, p. 18), while more detailed information, outlining the coordinator’s duties, was included in the project *Model of Education for All*

(2020a, pp. 159–160). Additionally, as per the Ministry’s Regulation of July 22, 2022 (Rozporządzenie..., 2022), mainstream schools are now required to employ a special education teacher starting from September of that year. This new mandate brings both hope and uncertainty regarding the scope and execution of the assigned responsibilities (Bartuś, 2023; Majewicz & Sikorski, 2024). Given the significance of this role, it is worthwhile to examine the tasks outlined in relevant legal frameworks and compare them to the duties proposed for SENCoS and KEWs.

Tasks of Special Education Teachers¹ in the Context of Responsibilities Designed for Special Educational Needs Coordinators and Inclusive Education Coordinators

Below, we present a comparison of the tasks assigned to special education teachers, drawn from the aforementioned regulation, with those proposed for Inclusive Education Coordinators (KEW) in the *Model of Education for All* (2020a), as well as for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) planned within the British school system (see Table 1). The choice to focus on the British model of SENCo is deliberate. While SENCo roles are present in mainstream schools across various educational systems, the British context has seen particularly vibrant discussions, supported by extensive research, on the role, tasks, and competencies of these coordinators. In Polish literature, there has been limited attention paid to coordinators, with most accounts of their duties based on British experiences (Zamkowska, 2005; Bełza, 2015; Zamkowska, 2016; Adamiak et al., 2017; Antonik, 2019; Lewandowska-Kidoń, 2019; Gajdzica, 2022). This is unsurprising given the lack of domestic experience in this area.

A preliminary analysis suggests that the roles of special education teachers differ considerably from those assigned to Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) and Inclusive Education Coordinators (KEW). This distinction is not unexpected, as the position of a special education teacher in a mainstream school or preschool is not merely a duplication of the concept of a Special Educational Needs Coordinator. Nevertheless, a closer examination of their responsibilities reveals that many tasks are broadly defined within the framework of special education teachers’ duties. To provide a structured framework for the ensuing comparative analysis, we will draw upon a metaphorical model proposed by Hugh Kearns (2005), which illustrates the various roles of SENCo. Based on narrative research, Kearns identified four distinct roles for SENCo: the arbiter, the rescuer, the auditor, and the collaborator (as cited in Mackenzie, 2007, pp. 214–215).

¹ To maintain clarity in the discussion, the term “special education teacher” in this article refers to individuals working in the role of special education teachers within mainstream preschools and schools. Additionally, when referring to school-based special education teachers, we also include those working in preschools.

Table 1. Simplified Responsibilities of Special Education Teachers in Mainstream Schools

Responsibilities of Special Education Teachers (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a)	Responsibilities of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) (Department for Education, 2001, p. 50; Department for Education, 2015, p. 108)	Responsibilities of the Inclusive Education Coordinator (KEW) (MEN, 2020a, pp. 159–160)
<p>Collaborating with teachers, educators and caregivers from education facilities and other specialists, parents, and students in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Recommending actions to the school or institution's principal to ensure active and full participation of students in school life, b) Conducting research and diagnostic activities to identify individual developmental and educational needs, c) Addressing students' academic and behavioral challenges, d) Determining necessary learning conditions, specialized equipment, and teaching materials. <p>Working with a team to develop and implement an individual educational-therapeutic program for students with special education needs.</p> <p>Supporting teachers, group educators, and other specialists in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Identifying the causes of students' academic difficulties or challenges in functioning, b) Providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in direct work with students, c) Adapting teaching methods and approaches to the individual developmental and educational needs of students, as well as their psychophysical capabilities, d) Selecting teaching methods, forms of instruction, and educational tools to meet students' needs. <p>Providing psychological and pedagogical assistance to students, their parents, and teachers.</p> <p>Collaborating, as needed, with other entities.</p> <p>Presenting proposals to the teaching staff regarding professional development opportunities for school or institutional teachers.</p>	<p>Overseeing the daily implementation of school policies related to special educational needs (SEN),</p> <p>Coordinating support and intervention for students with SEN,</p> <p>Collaborating with teachers and providing guidance on best practices for SEN,</p> <p>Managing and supervising teaching assistants involved in supporting students' learning,</p> <p>Maintaining and updating documentation for students with special educational needs,</p> <p>Ensuring regular communication with the parents of students with SEN,</p> <p>Contributing to the professional development and training of staff in SEN strategies,</p> <p>Working closely with school leadership to shape the strategic development of SEN policies and services,</p> <p>Establishing and maintaining connections with external agencies, including local education authorities (LEAs), educational psychology services, healthcare providers, social services, and voluntary organizations.</p>	<p>Leading and coordinating the work of a multidisciplinary team</p> <p>Managing consultations at the preschool or school level</p> <p>Overseeing the process of conducting comprehensive assessments and in-depth diagnoses of children or students,</p> <p>Coordinating preparations for integrating students who require special support into the school environment,</p> <p>Participating in the planning and allocation of the preschool or school budget, particularly regarding resources for students with special educational needs (SEN),</p> <p>Facilitating collaboration between the school and external organizations to create a comprehensive support network,</p> <p>Identifying staff development needs and organizing professional development opportunities in inclusive education,</p> <p>Collaborating with other KEWs in preschools and schools to build local support networks for teachers and students,</p> <p>Attending mandatory, periodic training sessions for KEWs, organized by accredited professional development institutions.</p>

Source: Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a; Department for Education, 2001, p. 50; Department for Education, 2015, p. 108; MEN, 2020a, pp. 159–160.

The most expansive area of responsibility for special education teachers in mainstream schools is characterized as collaboration with fellow educators, which is further delineated by four specific points (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a). Collaboration with teachers is central to virtually all of Kearns' identified roles (2005, pp. 214–215), which makes it imperative to clarify the particular aspects of this cooperation. The first aspect involves the recommendations made by the special education teacher to the school principal regarding actions that promote enhanced participation of students – especially those with special educational needs – in the school community (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a). This stipulation introduces a comprehensive array of tasks related to identifying physical and social barriers as well as adapting the school environment to accommodate the needs and capabilities of all students, particularly those with special educational needs. This broad scope of tasks encompasses adjustments to physical spaces, the delivery of information, diagnostic processes, and educational strategies.

The second area of responsibility involves identifying and describing the teaching materials necessary for the educational process. This task is rooted in the methodological expertise of the educator, as well as a deep understanding of the students' needs within the institution. Naturally, a list of essential or helpful teaching materials may also be compiled by classroom teachers, particularly those engaged in co-teaching. In such cases, the role of the special education teacher transitions to verification and coordination. Notably, these responsibilities correspond closely with typical functions of a SENCo, particularly fitting within the role of the arbitrator. In Kearns' typology, this role primarily entails monitoring and optimizing resources utilized for special educational needs, as well as being responsible for personnel development and effective resource management (as cited in Mackenzie, 2007, p. 214).

The subsequent two groups of tasks outlined under collaboration with teachers entail conducting diagnostic assessments and addressing students' educational and behavioral problems (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a). These responsibilities are linked to working with students directly. In Hugh Kearns' typology, coordinators who undertake these tasks are referred to as experts and rescuers. Experts provide support to teachers in situations requiring specialized knowledge – particularly in special education – while rescuers engage directly with students, often assisting in challenging circumstances encountered by classroom teachers (as cited in Mackenzie, 2007, pp. 214–215).

Another significant duty of special education teachers is collaborating with a team of educators and specialists to develop and implement individualized educational and therapeutic programs for students with officially recognized special educational needs (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a). These responsibilities correlate closely with the role described by Kearns as the auditor. Within this framework, SENCo assist teachers in fulfilling their administrative duties, which include creating educational curricula and managing individual plans for students, particularly those with disabilities (as cited in Mackenzie, 2007, pp. 214–215).

The final two tasks pertain to the special education teacher's collaboration with external entities that can support the school, such as the Specialized Center for Supporting

Inclusive Education and Psychological-Pedagogical Counseling Centers, and identifying and implementing professional development training for teachers (Rozporządzenie..., 2022, § 23a). Prominently featured in the typologies of SENCo tasks, these areas of responsibility, though seemingly distinct, are often interrelated in practice. Organizing inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaboration typically involves networking services and competencies, and participation in support networks requires ongoing professional development. Involvement in such collaborations often facilitates the acquisition of new skills (Widawska et al., 2023). In Kearns' typology, these responsibilities are embodied in the metaphor of the collaborator, where special education teachers engaged in meetings with educators and students from other schools – aimed at sharing best practices – are classified as coordinator-collaborators (as cited in Mackenzie, 2007, p. 215).

Final Conclusions

Despite the apparent emphasis in legal provisions on the responsibilities of special education teachers, particularly regarding direct support for students and teachers, many of their designated tasks involve coordination and organization, which brings their role closer to that of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo). The specified range of responsibilities for special education teachers is coherent and complementary; however, it raises questions about the feasibility of these duties.

A thorough comparative analysis reveals that, although there is a focus on providing direct assistance to students and teachers, as well as conducting diagnostic and therapeutic tasks, the responsibilities of special education teachers extend to a wide array of activities typical of SENCo roles. It is important to note that, at least in theoretical terms, the duties of SENCo do not include therapeutic and diagnostic responsibilities. Consequently, the conceptual framework for the roles of special education teachers in Poland is broader than what is typically associated with SENCo positions in many other countries. This discrepancy raises concerns about the practicality of the responsibilities assigned to this group of educators.

This inquiry is especially pertinent given the criticisms of unrealistic expectations surrounding SENCo duties (Farrell, 1998), significant bureaucratic burdens (Frankl, 2005), their insufficient standing within the school hierarchy in relation to coordinating and decision-making roles typical of leadership positions (Pearson & Ralph, 2007; Tissot, 2013), and the lack of coherence in the proposed roles (Mackenzie, 2007). The analysis of these conclusions suggests that the SENCo role is perceived as excessively burdensome, highly complex, inconsistent, and undervalued within the professional status of school personnel. Consequently, the Polish model of a special education teacher, which combines SENCo responsibilities with additional duties, may also be seen as difficult to implement in practice.

This likelihood is further underscored by preliminary research findings that illustrate the actual responsibilities of individuals working as special education teachers in

mainstream settings, which include emergency interventions (Bartuś, 2023; Majewicz & Sikorski, 2024). These tasks primarily involve covering for teachers, but also extend to various actions aimed at providing immediate support to both teachers and students. Such activities often go beyond the mandates established in the regulations that define the functions of special education teachers in mainstream institutions. Another significant issue – though not explored in depth due to the limited scope of this study – is the relationship between the responsibilities of special education teachers and those of school counselors, psychologists, and other specialists employed in mainstream settings. Arguably, some of these duties may be interchangeable, while others should involve close collaboration. A broader delineation of the responsibilities of specialists in mainstream schools could present an opportunity for flexible cooperation, which represents a promising avenue for future research.

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