



# Investigating Emotional Intelligence, Social Competencies, and Teacher Professional Experience in Addressing the Needs of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Across Various Educational Settings in Poland

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## Key words

school teachers, social competences, students with special educational needs, professional development.

## **Abstract**

Teachers are in the privileged position of being able to directly influence their students. Their work experience, perception and practical knowledge holds significant importance in shaping how they interact with special educational needs SEN students. This study aimed to identify the qualities, social competences and ask about the attitudes towards their work of those who teach and care for SEN pupils in different types of schools to determine whether the professional role of a teacher (general, support, special) leads to differences in their statements about their experience with these students. Research was conducted on teachers working with SEN students: 97 from integrative schools, 64 from mainstream school, 64 special school teachers (those with intellectual disability and autism). The data was collected using a questionnaire, the Two-dimensional Emotional Intelligence Inventory (DINEMO) and the Social Competence Questionnaire. The findings highlight that teachers with more experience tend to work with students with SEN (intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders) in schools where these students are more prevalent. It was challenging to find teachers with experience in certain areas, notably in groups of students with chronic illness and mental disorders, underscoring the need for additional training and practical support. The research emphasized that teachers with more experience were particularly evident concerning these last two groups of students.

## 1. Introduction

Sutton and Wheatley (2003) argue that heightened emotional intelligence (EI) in teachers correlates with increased professional effectiveness. Nias (1996) emphasizes EI's significance in education. EI, integrating emotion and thought, is a recent psychological concept (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2000). Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as «the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions.» Research explores EI's role in teaching, especially in fostering student relationships (Sayko, 2013) and maintaining discipline (Valente et al., 2020). EI significantly contributes to students' educational success by shaping behavior and preparing them for independent life (Guntersdorfer and Golubeva, 2018). Teachers with higher EI and social intelligence are more effective in developing students' social competences, crucial for navigating specific social situations acquired through training (Matczak, 2007). Three such social competences include intimacy, social exposure, and assertiveness. Teachers play a vital role, especially for students with special educational needs (SEN) lacking in these competences (Diamond, Huang, and Steed, 2011). The impact of inclusive education on these competences is notable (Tápai, 2015). Maree and Mokhuane (2007) suggest evidence for the value of EI in teachers, although studies may not explicitly mention EI or Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Research gaps exist in assessing EI and social competences in students, including those with SEN, and teacher preparation levels in this context.

### 1.1. Significance of the length of service in working with SEN students

In education, teachers' experience is pivotal in personnel policy (Rice, 2010). Novice teachers benefit from fresh education and meaningful work experiences, exploring careers, developing skills, and enhancing soft skills,

confidence, and abilities. Teaching experience enriches knowledge, strengthens skills, and builds professional networks. Experienced teachers excel at motivating students, identifying effective instructional practices, earning community trust, and mentoring peers. Their accumulated expertise is irreplaceable, showcasing the value of experience in the field.

Some research suggests that brand-new teachers may be less effective than those with some experience (Sass, 2007& Ladd, 2008). However, Graham et al. (2020) argue that there is limited support for the claim that newly qualified teachers are less competent than those with more years of experience. Boyd et al. (2007) found that teachers experience the most significant productivity growth in the first few years of work, followed by a decline in performance. On average, teachers with over 20 years of experience are more effective than inexperienced teachers, but not significantly more effective than those with 5 years of experience (Ladd, 2008). The research provides inconclusive findings, indicating certain correlations between teaching quality and teacher experience with varying conceptualizations (Graham et al., 2020).

### 1.2. Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in Polish educational institutions

Poland follows the «multiple educational paths» model (Woźniak, 2008), providing options such as mainstream, integrative, or special education. These paths have distinct traditions, approaches, and goals (Skura, 2022). Mainstream education aims to remove all obstacles and barriers emerging on the way to a situation when all children learn together (Lindsay, 2007). It entails a complete transformation of schools so as they approach every child in the most individualised and flexible way. Mainstream schools in Poland can also offer inclusive education with possible special or integrated classes. Integrated schools have smaller class sizes than mainstream schools, for (typically) 15-20 students, with an average of 3-5 students with disabilities, the curriculum is identical. Integration involves specialized activities for inclusive engagement (Gajdzica, 2011). As assumed

within this approach, factors facilitating success include, on the one hand, being, playing and learning together, which allows the students to get to know each other and develop an attitude towards diversity in a group; on the other hand, focusing on the student's special needs, adaptation of the curriculum, forms, methods, evaluation and strengthening the child's developmental potential. Integrated classes need extra support teachers, and Polish teachers may collaborate in integrated or mainstream schools, especially for children with autism or multiple disabilities.

Whereas ~~while~~ some students may opt for special or residential special schools. Special education goes beyond knowledge transfer, addressing mental and physical issues (Kauffman et al., 2019). Apart from equipping students with information, skills and attitudes, special education aims to compensate, correct and improve the students' disturbed psychological and physical processes and prepare for a relatively independent life, in which they will fulfil roles in accordance with their needs and social expectations. Special schools or special classes typically have one teacher for every 6 to 8 students with moderate to severe disabilities, and 2 to 4 students with multiple disabilities.

The parent, with the school's assistance, initiates the diagnosis and obtains the special education needs certificate from the psychological-educational counseling center (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1591). According to Polish law, the parent also has the right to participate in the development and modification of the individual educational and therapeutic program for their child, as well as to take part in the multi-specialist evaluation of their child's functioning. What more, it is the prerogative of the parents to decide on their child's educational path (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59).

Teachers in distinct education models differ in their qualifications, competencies, and roles. Prospective special teachers complete university courses with pedagogical training, handling tasks from diagnosing disabilities to implementing education plans. Support teachers, specialising in special pedagogy, collaborate with general teachers and other specialists. General teachers, often lacking specific SEN training, manage educational tasks and integration inclusion

responsibilities. Regardless of the model, all teachers engage in teaching, integration, diagnosing, nurturing, and supporting students with challenging needs. The intricate nature of these responsibilities leads to a demand for concrete guidelines, especially in behavioral difficulties, prompting both general and support teachers to express the need for supervision and training.

## 2. Methodology and methods

### 2.1. The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate the personal and social competencies of teachers and their skills inworking with students with various special educational needs. The objective was to determine whether theprofessional role of a teacher (general, support, special) leads to differences in their statements about their experiences with these students. Furthermore, by analyzing each group of teachers separately, the aim was todetermine whether their levels of emotional intelligence and social competence differed.

### 2.2. Participants

The study included 225 teachers, comprising 130 (58 %) general teachers, 62 (27 %) support teachers, and 33 (15 %) special teachers,  $\chi^2(2) = 66.107$ ;  $p < 0.001$  (table 1). No significant differences were observed in sex, age, or education among the groups. However, a notable distinction emerged ( $\chi^2(6) = 14.618$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) in their professional length of service. Over 15 years was prevalent for general teachers (50 %), while support teachers mainly reported 5 to 10 years (30 %). In this group, 26 % had less than 5 years of experience in school.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the compared groups of teachers (N = 225)**

	General	Support	Special	
<b>Gender<sup>a</sup></b>				
Female	109 (83,8)	56 (91,8)	29 (87,9)	$\chi^2(2) = 2.320, p = .313$
Male	21 (16,2)	5 (8,2)	4 (12,1)	
<b>Age<sup>a</sup></b>				
up to 30	17 (13,1)	13 (21,3)	7 (21,2)	$\chi^2(6) = 5.430, p = .490$
from 30 to 40	44 (33,8)	23 (37,7)	12 (36,4)	
from 40 to 50	34 (26,2)	15 (24,6)	9 (27,3)	
over 50	35 (26,9)	10 (16,4)	5 (15,1)	
<b>Education<sup>a</sup></b>				
Bachelors	-	1 (1,6)	-	$\chi^2(4) = 4.328, p = .375$
Masters	128 (98,5)	60 (98,4)	32 (97,0)	
Doctorate	2 (1,5)	-	1 (3,0)	
<b>Length of service<sup>a</sup></b>				
less than 5 years	18 (13,8)	16 (26,2)	3 (9,1)	$\chi^2(6) = 14.618, p < .05$
more than 5 years	24 (18,4)	18 (29,5)	8 (24,2)	
more than 10 years	22 (16,8)	11 (18,1)	9 (27,3)	
more than 15 years	65 (50,0)	16 (26,2)	13 (39,4)	

<sup>a</sup>Actual figures given (% in parenthesis)

### 2.3. The Procedure, Tools and Method

The study was conducted in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, the study involved 6 schools: 2 integrative, 2 special, and 2 mainstream. Data, gathered through a questionnaire, aimed to extract insights on teachers' experiences with different types of SEN. The opinions of teachers on working with students with intellectual disabilities, autism, physical disabilities, chronic illness and mental disorders were therefore collected. The research also employed tools such as the Two-dimension Emotional Intelligence Inventory (DINEMO; Matczak and Jaworowska 2006) and Social Competences Questionnaire (KKS; Matczak, 2007).

The Two-Dimensional Emotional Intelligence Inventory gauged emotional intelligence, defined as the total capacity to process emotional information. Comprising 33 items depicting emotional situations, it offered four reaction options for respondents. The

inventory evaluated overall emotional intelligence and its two dimensions: interpersonal, focusing on recognizing, understanding, and respecting others' emotions, and intrapersonal, centered on self-awareness focused on self-awareness, understanding, respect, and expression of one's emotions. In our research, reliability, measured by Cronbach's coefficient, was .635 overall, and .639 and .341 for individual scales, respectively.

The Social Competence Questionnaire gauged teachers' social competences, defined as «complex skills conditioning the effectiveness of coping with certain types of social situations, acquired by an individual in the course of social training» (Matczak 2007, p. 7). Featuring 90 descriptions graded on a four-point scale (1 - definitely good to 4 - definitely bad), it assessed teachers' perceived ability to handle various situations. The questionnaire provided insights into the overall level of teachers' social competences (the overall score; SC) and their proficiency in three situation types: intimate

(Int), social exposure (SE), and assertiveness (A). Cronbach's coefficient for each KKS scale surpassed .7 [.953 (SC) and for scales respectively: .833 (Int), .917 (ES), and .861 (A)], indicating satisfactory reliability. Matczak (2007) distinguishes three types of social situations: intimate, related to building and maintaining close interpersonal contacts, accompanied by self-disclosure (e.g. confiding or listening to confessions), social exposure, where the individual is the centre of attention, subject to the assessment of others, situations requiring assertiveness, where you achieve your goals or needs by exerting or resisting influence.

Analyses regarding the experience in working with children with various types of SEN were conducted, divided by the type of teacher, using non-parametric chi-square tests. Teachers were asked for their opinions on working with students with SEN, most frequently attending all types of schools.

### 2.4. Ethics

Ethical considerations were crucial in this research conducted within school premises. Consent was obtained from principals and teachers in each institution, with a transparent communication

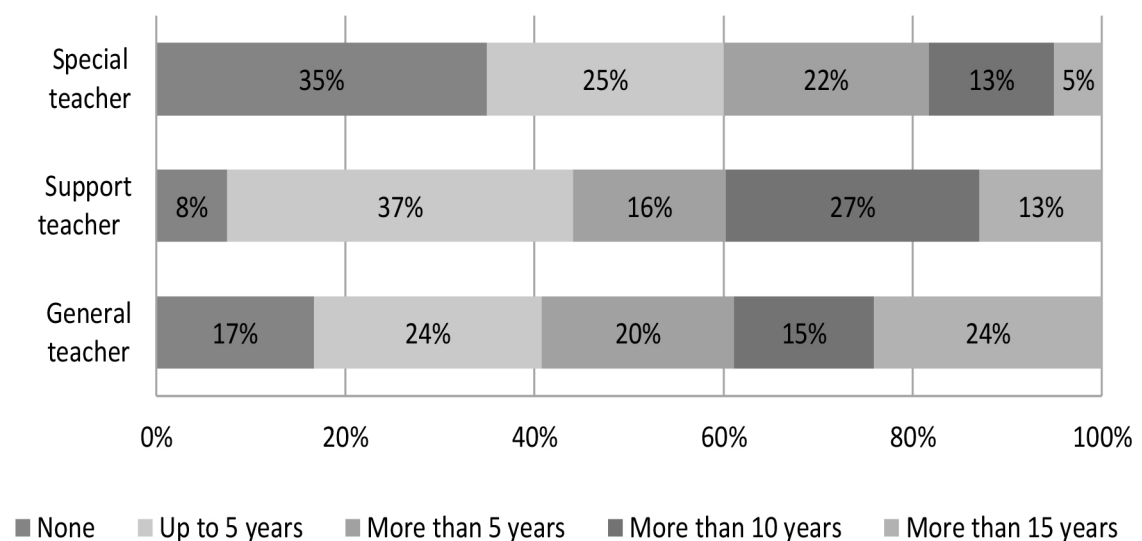
of the study's purpose. Teachers were invited to participate voluntarily, ensuring anonymity and avoiding the collection of sensitive data. The research adhered to established academic procedures in educational settings, coding participants' identities for confidentiality during reporting. Unique codes were assigned to questionnaires, and participants could withdraw at any stage, even taking the questionnaires with them and contributing completed materials to the collective dataset.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Experience in working with children with various types of SEN

The findings reveal significant differences based on the type of teacher ( $\chi^2(8) = 30.606; p < .001$ ) regarding the duration of experience in working with children with mild intellectual disabilities (Figure 1). Notably, about 40 % of general teachers and support

**Figure 1. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with students with mild ID**



teachers have a decade or more of experience with this group. Within special teachers, only 18 % have worked for over 10 years. What’s more, special teachers commonly (35 %) lack experience with children with mild intellectual disabilities.

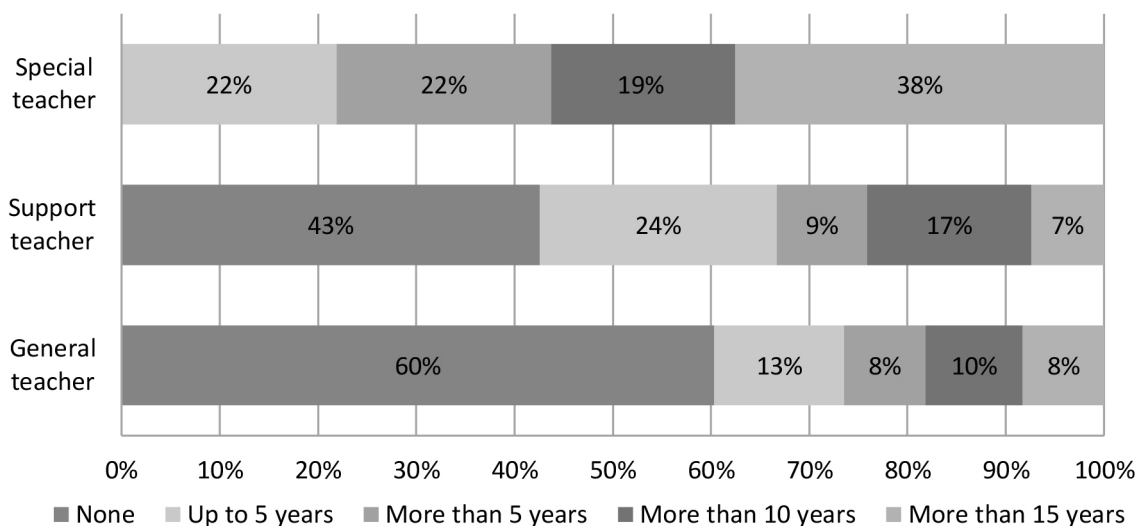
In the surveyed group (Figure 2), a majority of general teachers (60 %) lack experience working with children having moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. Among those with experience, (13 %) have less than 5 years. In the support teachers’ group, a prevalent trend is the absence of experience in such work (43 %). However, a significant portion (24 %) in this group claims to have worked with the discussed children for less than five years. Special teachers generally have

experience in this domain, with the highest percentage (38 %) boasting over 15 years of experience.

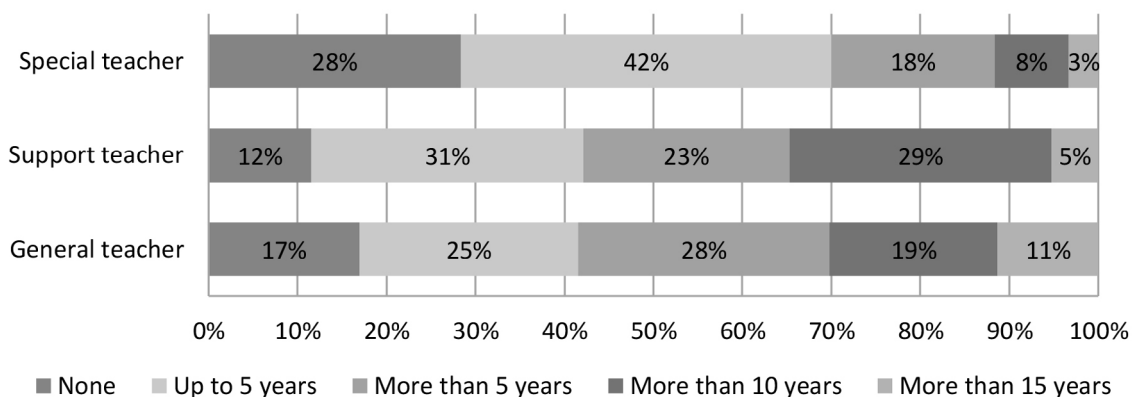
The experience in working with high-functioning children with difficulties in the autism spectrum (Figure 3) significantly varies among those surveyed based on the type of teacher ( $\chi^2(8) = 20.969$ ;  $p < .01$ ). A substantial percentage of general teachers (25 % and 28 %) and support teachers (31 % and 23 %) have up to 5 or more than 5 years of experience in working with such children. Among support teachers, 29 % have over 10 years of experience in such work. In the group of special teachers, 28 % indicated having no experience.

The next group of children that significantly divided the respondents based on the type of teacher ( $\chi^2(8)$

**Figure 2. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with moderate or severe ID**



**Figure 3. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with high-functioning students with ASDs**



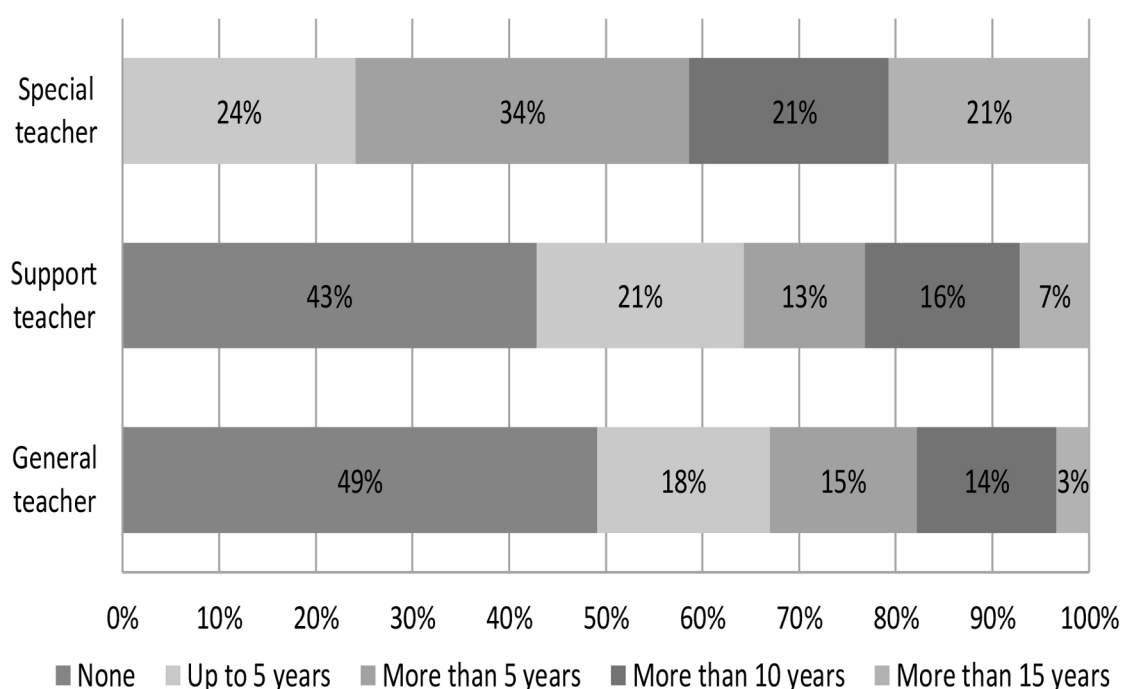
= 31.328;  $p < .001$ ) are low-functioning students with difficulties in the autism spectrum (Figure 4). Among special teachers, there are no individuals without experience in working with this group of students. The largest percentage of them has more than 5 years of experience in such work. The division of general teachers and support teachers based on their experience is similar. Most of them do not have any experience in such work. Only around one third have more than 5 years.

The length of experience in working with children with physical disabilities significantly differs among the respondents based on the type of teacher ( $\chi^2(8) = 16.228$ ;  $p < .05$ ) (Figure 5). In the group of general teachers, the largest percentage (37 %) consists of individuals without experience, and the smallest percentage (4 %) have over 15 years of experience. Meanwhile, the division between support teachers and special teachers is similar. The vast majority (approx. 85 %) of them have experience in such work, with one-third of teachers having less than 5 years of experience. On the other hand, every fourth support teacher and every fifth special teacher have over 10 years of experience in working with children with physical disabilities.

The acquired experience distinguishes the surveyed teachers ( $\chi^2(8) = 27.208$ ;  $p < .001$ ) in relation to working with a group of children with chronic illness (Figure 6). Experience levels of general and support teachers were very similar, with inexperienced teachers being most common. However, those with experience often surpass 10 years or remain below 5 years. Special teachers predominantly possess over 5 years of experience with the mentioned student group. Interestingly, one in five individuals in this group claimed to have no experience in such work at all.

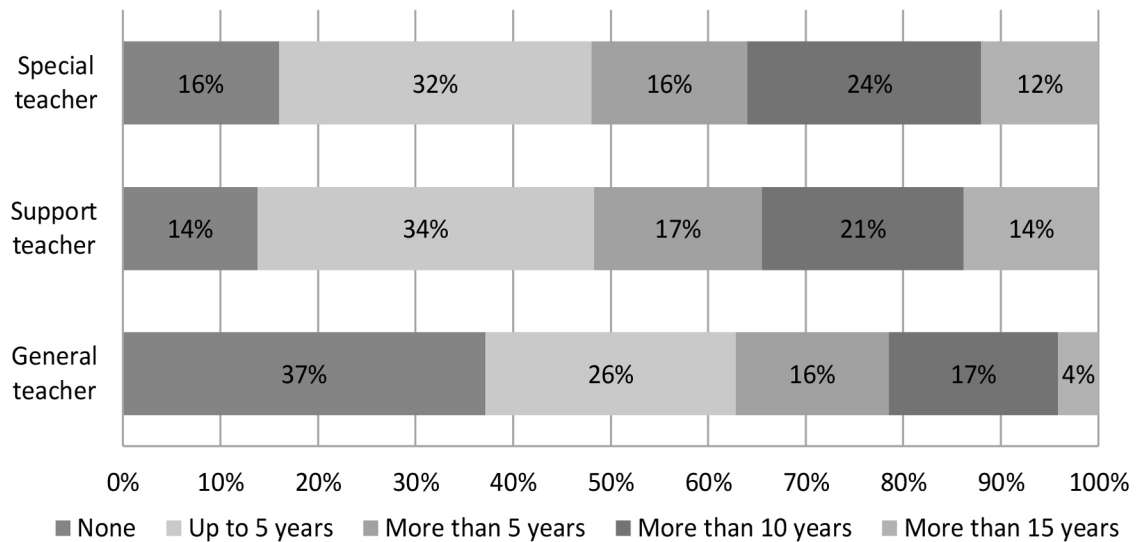
The division into teacher types ( $\chi^2(8) = 19.711$ ;  $p < .05$ ) also significantly differentiates the length of experience in working with children with mental disorders (Figure 7). In the group of general teachers and support teachers, the only significant difference in the distributions of experience in working with children with mental disorders is the percentage of individuals without such experience. In the case of the former, there are more teachers without such experience. Among special teachers, individuals with experience not exceeding 5 years dominate (35 %). Furthermore, every fourth teacher in this group has experience exceeding 5 years or exceeding 15 years.

**Figure 4. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with low-functioning students with ASDs**

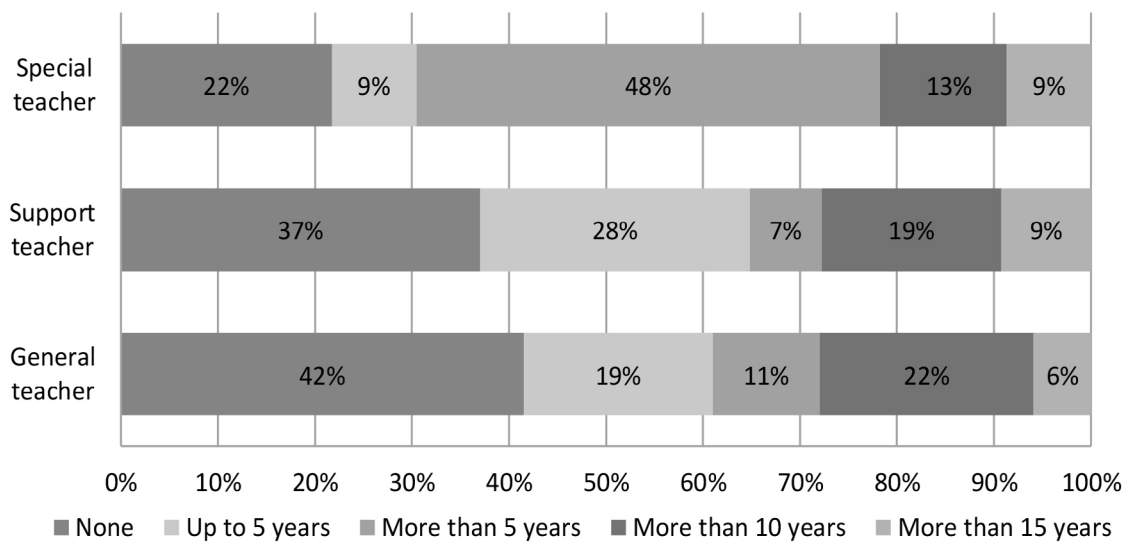




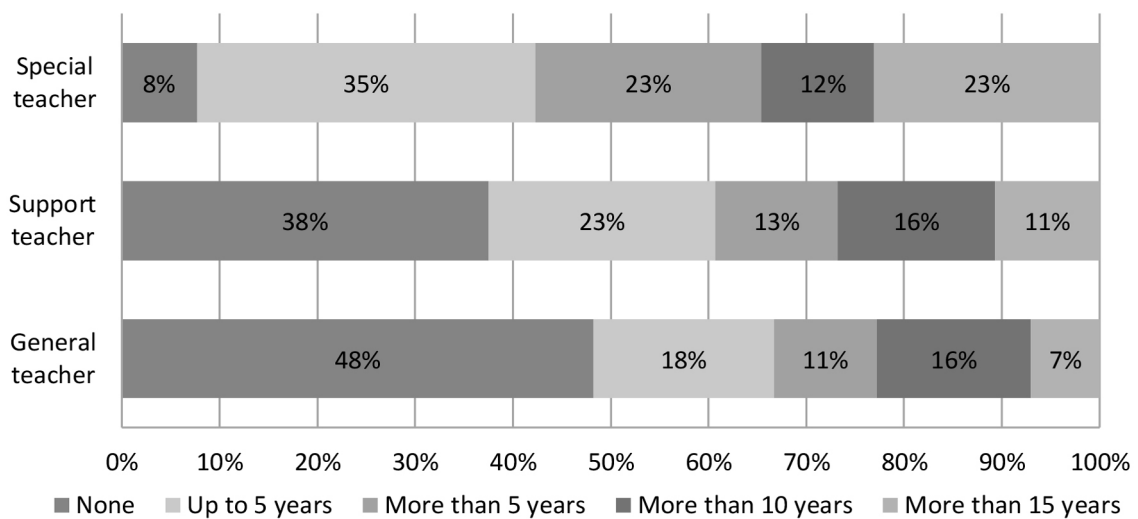
**Figure 5. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with physical disabilities students**



**Figure 6. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with chronic illness students**



**Figure 7. A comparison of the work experience of teachers working with mental illnesses students**



### 3.2. Differences in emotional intelligence and social competences between teachers with and without experience in working with students with special educational needs (SEN)

Based on the respondents' answers to the survey question «Do you have experience working with children from the mentioned groups of students with SEN?», we divided them into two groups: teachers with and without such experience. This allowed us to compare both groups in terms of emotional intelligence levels and social competences. The analyses were conducted using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test. The obtained results are presented in tables 2 and 3.

Based on the obtained results, we observed statistically significant differences in the overall level of emotional intelligence between the compared groups of teachers. Teachers with experience in working with children with mild intellectual disabilities ( $M = 21.33$ ,  $SD = 4.25$ ) and profound intellectual disabilities ( $M = 21.75$ ,  $SD = 4.53$ ), as well as chronic illnesses ( $M = 21.28$ ,  $SD = 3.96$ ), demonstrate a higher level of emotional intelligence

than teachers who do not have experience working with the mentioned groups of students with SEN.

On the other hand, the results obtained for the included dimensions of emotional intelligence, namely its interpersonal (OTHERS) and intrapersonal (I) aspects, allowed us to observe another difference. It turns out that teachers with experience in working with children with chronic illnesses ( $M = 8.68$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ) exhibit a higher level of the intrapersonal dimension of emotional intelligence. For the other groups of children with special educational needs, such as mild and moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders (regardless of their degree), physical disabilities, and mental disorders, there were no differences between teachers with and without experience in working with such students.

On the basis of the obtained results regarding the overall level of social competences, we observed statistically significant differences between the compared groups of teachers for students with five types of special educational needs (SEN). It turns out that teachers with experience in working with children with mental disorders ( $M = 177.56$ ,  $SD = 22.52$ ) achieve higher scores in the level of effective coping in various social situations than teachers

**Table 2. Differences in the level of emotional intelligence and its dimensions among teachers with and without experience in working with students with different types of SEN**

Disabilities	Work experience	N	EI				OTHERS				I			
			M	SD	U	P	M	SD	U	p	M	SD	U	p
mild ID	no	35	21,06	3,48	2858,50	0,970	12,83	2,66	2732,00	0,653	8,57	1,69	2829,50	0,895
	yes	164	20,86	4,23			12,90	2,88			8,52	2,13		
moderate or severe ID	no	92	20,64	4,20	4645,50	0,493	12,72	2,81	4791,50	0,746	8,43	2,10	4686,00	0,556
	yes	107	20,81	4,01			12,81	2,85			8,58	2,09		
high-functioning autism	no	36	20,33	3,75	2621,00	0,291	12,31	2,64	2517,00	0,164	8,53	1,89	2922,00	0,923
	yes	164	20,87	4,32			12,93	2,94			8,48	2,13		
low-functioning autism	no	78	21,05	4,11	4486,00	0,765	13,09	2,77	4284,00	0,410	8,45	2,19	4462,00	0,716
	yes	118	20,44	4,26			12,57	2,95			8,47	2,07		
physical disability	no	55	20,93	3,88	3919,00	0,970	13,18	2,63	3708,50	0,532	8,27	1,95	3510,00	0,237
	yes	143	20,73	4,38			12,68	2,98			8,61	2,16		
chronic illness	no	70	19,81	4,49	3282,00*	0,023	12,23	3,30	3469,50	0,079	8,06	2,06	3384,50*	0,045
	yes	117	21,28	3,96			13,21	2,56			8,68	2,05		
mental illness	no	74	20,88	3,97	4210,00	0,982	12,92	2,80	4203,00	0,967	8,45	2,04	4064,50	0,670
	yes	114	20,67	4,34			12,79	2,96			8,49	2,07		

Note. EI - emotional intelligence; OTHERS - interpersonal intelligence; I - intrapersonal intelligence. Statistically significant differences are bolded.

\*  $p < 0,05$ .

**Table 3. Differences in social competencies in groups of teachers with and without experience in working with students with different types of SEN**

Disabilities	Work experience	N	S.C.				Int				SE				A			
			M	SD	U	p	M	SD	U	p	M	SD	U	p	M	SD	U	p
mild ID	no	36	167,75	23,11	2377,00	0,067	41,69	6,68	2243,50*	0,024	50,97	9,52	2525,00	0,159	44,81	6,69	2563,50	0,198
	yes	164	176,45	22,60			44,24	5,96			53,73	8,71			46,70	7,28		
moderate or severe ID	no	94	172,47	22,44	4543,00	0,282	43,28	6,20	4461,50	0,202	53,03	8,55	4959,00	0,865	45,19	7,10	4117,00*	0,026
	yes	106	176,81	23,76			44,15	6,22			53,35	9,49			47,52	7,28		
high-functioning autism	no	37	170,41	24,84	2777,00	0,391	41,68	6,58	2398,00*	0,041	52,38	9,93	3031,00	0,901	45,89	7,40	3019,00	0,872
	yes	165	174,75	23,47			44,05	6,14			52,93	9,04			46,23	7,39		
low-functioning autism	no	79	170,78	19,45	4094,00	0,176	42,99	6,00	4199,00	0,277	52,10	7,13	4307,50	0,367	44,65	6,23	3718,50*	0,016
	yes	117	175,46	24,52			43,85	6,24			53,14	9,90			47,03	7,56		
physical disability	no	55	172,20	19,36	3827,00	0,714	43,38	5,71	3795,00	0,649	52,45	7,81	3937,00	0,890	45,35	6,32	3663,50	0,375
	yes	144	174,17	24,37			43,60	6,44			52,81	9,38			46,36	7,48		
chronic illness	no	71	171,51	21,98	3858,50	0,364	42,90	5,82	3729,00	0,206	53,01	8,35	4217,00	0,984	44,63	7,31	3500,50*	0,048
	yes	118	175,51	22,63			43,92	6,42			52,92	9,01			47,12	6,64		
mental illness	no	76	168,58	22,93	3383,50**	0,008	42,38	5,94	3543,00*	0,027	51,46	8,50	3643,50*	0,042	44,13	7,13	3265,00**	0,002
	yes	115	177,56	22,52			44,24	6,28			53,91	8,97			47,60	7,14		

Note. SC - social competencies; Int - competencies in situations of close interpersonal contact; SE - competencies in situations requiring social exposure; A - competencies in situations requiring assertiveness. Statistically significant differences are bolded.

\*  $p < 0,05$ .

who do not have experience in working with the mentioned groups of students with SEN.

On the other hand, the results obtained for situations requiring social competences, allowed us to observe additional differences. It turns out that teachers with experience in working with children with mild intellectual disabilities ( $M = 44.24$ ,  $SD = 5.96$ ), high-functioning autism ( $M = 44.05$ ,  $SD = 6.14$ ), and mental disorders ( $M = 44.24$ ,  $SD = 6.28$ ) achieve better results on the scale of coping with situations involving close interpersonal contacts than teachers who do not have such experience.

Furthermore, individuals who worked with students with mental disorders ( $M = 53.91$ ,  $SD = 8.97$ ) achieve higher scores on the scale of coping with situations where they are the focus of attention and potential evaluation by multiple people than teachers who have not worked with students from these groups.

The last type of situation in which social competences regulate the effectiveness of behaviors is situations requiring assertiveness. Higher scores in this area were also achieved by teachers with experience in working with the following groups of children with SEN: moderate to severe ( $M = 47.52$ ,  $SD = 7.14$ ), low-functioning autism ( $M = 47.03$ ,  $SD = 7.56$ ), chronic illness ( $M = 47.12$ ,  $SD = 6.64$ ), and mental disorders ( $M = 47.60$ ,  $SD = 7.14$ ).

## 4. Discussion

The analysis of the work experiences of different types of teachers in working with children with SEN revealed that, in the case of teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities, special teachers have a significant amount of experience, although a certain group (17 %) indicated that they have no experience. Support teachers seem to have the most experience, while general teachers have the least, although some of them already have more than 5 and more than 10 years of experience. Students with

mild intellectual disabilities constitute a relatively large group of children with SEN in mainstream and inclusive schools. Deficits in cognitive abilities and functions for these students can hinder learning and lower the level of developmental and social competencies. Support teachers present in inclusive classrooms ensure suitable conditions for students to follow the same curriculum as their non-disabled peers, apply appropriate methods to stimulate emotional-social and intellectual development, and adjust the learning process to their individual needs and capabilities. A study on the physical education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities in Turkey indicates that younger teachers exhibit more favorable attitudes. There are also differences between younger and older teachers, as well as those with less than and more than 10 years of service (Nalbant et al., 2013).

Another situation can be observed concerning teachers declaring their experience in working with students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities. The results showed that primarily it is special teachers who take on this task for the longest period. The needs of students who often struggle with motor skills, speech, perception, memory, and following instructions may be better met in special schools, where classes, according to Polish law, consist of 6 to 8 students with similar functional difficulties, and they are taught by appropriately qualified teachers. The lack or lesser experience in working with this group of students by teachers in mainstream and inclusive schools is attributed to the diversity and size of their classes, but also the common choice by this group of students to attend special schools. Factors related to the way special educators are trained and obtain professional knowledge of how to work, which is also facilitated by the amount of contact time special teachers have with students with intellectual disabilities, contribute to this experience disparity among the teachers researched. A study conducted by Govender (2002) found that teachers in special classes expressed a more positive attitude towards creating favorable educational and developmental opportunities for these students compared to general teachers.

The results regarding experience in working with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

students showed that support teachers have the most experience, followed by general teachers. Students with average intellectual abilities but various qualitative abnormalities in social interaction, communication patterns, and a limited and stereotyped repertoire of interests and activities, most often attend mainstream schools and integrated schools. However, their families choose special schools for them, leading special teachers to report slightly less experience in working with them. General education teachers in inclusive classrooms often lack training to instruct students with special needs like ASD (Busby et al., 2012), relying on the assistance of a support teacher who is qualified to implement tailored interventions for children with special needs.

The situation is different for low-functioning students with autism spectrum disorders. Special education teachers have the most experience working with students who, in addition to complex developmental and central nervous system abnormalities, also experience delays or impairments in speech and cognitive functions. The responses of support teachers, and especially general teachers, indicate either no experience or significantly less experience. This group of students more often fulfills their school obligation in special schools. Special education teachers undergo specific training on ASD as part of their university curriculum and primarily work in special schools. Teachers who have received in-service training on autism exhibit increased self-efficacy, a crucial factor contributing to an enhanced overall experience (Benoit, 2013).

The obtained data showed statistically significant differences in terms of experience in working with students with physical disabilities. General teachers had the least experience, while the results for special teachers and support teachers were similar. It is worth mentioning that students with disabilities who can follow the curriculum just like their peers more often choose inclusive schools, where the building and the external school environment (the school grounds and its surroundings) are appropriately adapted for them. Students requiring additional support due to multiple disabilities more often attend special schools, where they can receive constant care and

assistance (including self-care and mobility within the school premises). Creating tasks for students with multiple disabilities can be challenging for educators, given the intensive educational support required. The failure of mainstream schools to address the diverse needs of these students may prevent them from reaching their full potential, potentially resulting in their exclusion from educational opportunities (Gwandimus & Wandela, 2022).

In the case of declaring experience in working with students with chronic illnesses, it turned out that more students with conditions characterised by a long duration and slow progression of changes were taught by special teachers. Many support teachers and general teachers had either no or minimal experience working with these students. This seems intriguing given the frequency of chronic illnesses in society, including among children. Perhaps the invisibility of symptoms or limited knowledge about their occurrence led to the respondents' responses. Research (Adams & Bourke, 2023; Clay et al., 2004) indicates that teachers frequently experience a lack of readiness to cater to the diverse needs of all students, particularly feeling inadequately equipped to effectively teach and include children dealing with chronic illnesses.

Indicating one specific chronic illness, such as mental health disorders, showed that special teachers had the most experience in working with students facing such challenges. Once again, an interesting question arises: do support teachers and general teachers, who indicated that they had less experience, lack knowledge on how to help children because they don't understand the struggles caused by conditions such as depression, eating disorders, sleep disorders, or personality disorders, or do they have insufficient knowledge about the most common symptoms? Deaton et al. (2022) indicated that teachers face a shortage of training and support in dealing with students with mental health challenges in the classroom, leading to numerous instances of trial and error.

The subsequent analysis aimed to identify variations in teachers' emotional intelligence (EI) and social competences, recognized as crucial in the teaching profession (Ergur, 2009; Jennings & Greenberg,

2009). Jennings and Greenberg (2009), advocates of the Prosocial Classroom model, underscored the role of teachers with social and emotional competence in fostering positive teacher-student relationships. These educators adeptly perceive students' emotions and their origins, skillfully motivating appropriate behavior. Their supportive and empathetic approach contributes to establishing robust connections with students, a quality especially advantageous for children with special educational needs (SEN).

Teachers with experience in working with various degrees of intellectual disabilities and chronic illnesses exhibit a higher level of emotional intelligence, indicating better emotional functioning. To comprehensively address challenges related to intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior limitations in individuals with intellectual disabilities, educators must provide direct instruction across various skill areas beyond the standard curriculum. These skills, although more functional, are crucial for fostering future independence in these individuals (Turnbull, Turnbull & Wehmeyer, 2007). The teacher-student relationship should be marked by an attitude of appreciation, openness, and, notably, an emphasis on the positive, irrespective of the student's behavior. Achieving this balance necessitates a blend of proximity to the student and maintaining an appropriate distance (Weiss et al., 2019). The specific nature of chronic disease, on the other hand, causes the child to experience long and repeated hospitalizations which cause distressing situations affecting medical, psychological, social, family and educational considerations (Fernández, 2002). Educators demonstrating high emotional intelligence foster robust, positive connections with students, grounded in trust, respect, and understanding. These relationships are instrumental in elevating student engagement, motivation, and active involvement in classroom activities.

Additionally, teachers with experience in working with children with chronic illnesses exhibit a higher level of the intrapersonal (I) dimension of emotional intelligence. This dimension refers to the ability to be aware of, understand, respect, and express one's own emotions. These teachers, therefore, consider emotions when making decisions and express their

emotions in a manner adapted to the demands of the situation. Students dealing with chronic illnesses, irrespective of the illness's visibility or their openness about it, may also contend with mental health challenges. In this situation, how teachers interpersonally relate to their students is highly predictive of the students' emotions. The specific relationship that develops between teachers and students drives the emotional experiences of students (Mainhard, et al., 2019). Those with hidden illnesses often encounter inquiries and criticisms from their peers and others (Venville, et al, 2016).

The obtained results also showed that teachers with experience in working with children with mental disorders have higher scores in the effective coping level in various social situations. This means that teachers expressing a willingness to work with the discussed group of children are better adapted to dealing with socially challenging situations. They handle their own social needs more effectively without impeding the rights of others, express both positive and negative emotions, and elicit positive emotions more effectively in the social environment. Teachers are often attuned or aware when students go through a difficult emotional period. Furthermore, teachers who have worked more with students with mental disorders have higher scores in coping with situations where they are the focus of attention and potential evaluation by many people. This indicates that teachers function better in situations where a significant amount of attention is focused on them, and they may be subject to assessment by others. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a positive impact when they establish a supportive environment where students feel safe discussing their emotional well-being (Lowry, 2022). Teachers' awareness of mental health allows teachers to better support students with mental health problems and help them cope with stress, anxiety or lowered mood, and thus better cope with challenges in social relationships and social assessment of the bonds they make.

Teachers with experience in working with children with mild intellectual disabilities, high-functioning autism, and mental disorders have better scores in coping with situations related to close interpersonal contacts. This means that these participants



establish closer interpersonal relationships more effectively and possess skills related to openness to others, such as sharing personal issues or listening to confessions. Research indicates that students who view their teachers as enthusiastic, offering positive reinforcement for achievement (Frenzel et al., 2009; Goetz et al., 2013), and demonstrating effective monitoring and clarity (Kunter, Baumert, & Köller, 2007) —characterized by high levels of both agency and communion— tend to experience more positive emotions. Emotional engagement and relational aspects can also be crucial elements of what constitutes professionalism (Fisher & Byrne 2012; Ruppap, Roberts, & Olson 2017).

The research has shown that teachers with more experience in working with students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, low-functioning autism, chronic illness, and mental disorders have higher scores on the scale of competencies related to the effectiveness of behaviors in situations requiring assertiveness. This means that teachers expressing a willingness to work with the discussed group of children are better equipped to handle socially challenging situations. Moreover, they excel in meeting their own social needs without impeding the rights of others, expressing both positive and negative feelings, and effectively evoking positive emotions in the social environment. Timely feedback is crucial for all students in the classroom. When offering feedback to students with intellectual disabilities and low-functioning autism, ensure it is provided as promptly as possible. Delayed feedback may hinder their ability to grasp the cause and effect of their behavior, leading to missed learning opportunities (Reynolds, Zupanick, & Dombeck, 2013). Teachers must have the ability to provide feedback directly to the student, both in praise and criticism.

## 5. Conclusions

Research is inconclusive on whether new teachers are more effective than experienced ones. Education and appropriate teaching skills play a significant role in their perceived efficacy. The research carried out indicated that teachers with more experience in working with students with SEN (intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders) are often in schools where these students are most prevalent. Identifying experienced teachers of students with chronic illness and mental illnesses proved challenging, indicating a need for training and practical supplementation. Emotional intelligence and competence help teachers understand students better. The research showed that, especially concerning these last two groups of students, teachers with more experience possess the vital skills, personality characteristics, and behaviours that students perceive as impacting their motivation to learn. A teacher with high EI is able to skilfully shape pupils' behaviour and prepare them to function independently in everyday life (Armour, 2012; Merritt et al., 2012), which is crucial for social integration. Teachers wield a profound influence on their students' perception of the world. They occupy one of the most pivotal roles in the intellectual and personal growth of children and adolescents. Hence, their cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral skills, facilitating the establishment and nurturing of creative educational relationships with their students, appear critical. Therefore, it is advisable to incorporate training in emotional intelligence and social competence into teachers' pedagogical practices. This integration aims to bolster the effectiveness of the teaching process and complement social-emotional development. Perhaps these skills could be recognized as essential teacher competencies contributing to both personal and professional advancement.

## Limitations

Constraints arise from the scarcity of the three educational paths for children with SEN outside Poland, hindering direct comparisons. Our research, focusing on analysing the length of service in working with various SEN types, is distinct by school and teacher type, complicating the identification of analogous studies in different global educational contexts.

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