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Working with a Pupil with Asperger's Syndrome in the Scope of Education, Pedagogy and Integration – From the Practice of a Support Teacher

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article was to present the long-term activities undertaken by a support teacher when working with a pupil with Asperger's syndrome in a public school. The analysis was carried out on a 7-year learning period of a pupil's in a school, from the first to the seventh form, including the division into the period before the introduction of a support teacher and after the introduction of a support teacher. After the introduction of a support teacher, significant positive effects were observed in three areas of the pupil's functioning, i.e. the pedagogic sphere, the educational sphere and the integration sphere.

KEYWORDS: Asperger's syndrome, a pupil, work of a support teacher

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INTRODUCTION

Scientific research on the determinants of educational opportunities for children also those with autism spectrum disorder, focuses usually on three main entities: students, parents of students and teachers. It is important that taking into account the needs, possibilities, but also opinions, feelings and attitudes each of the groups (and these are strongly conditioned by the specificity of the country, the tradition of experience), look for educational solutions that take into account expectations in the possible maximum degree (Chrzanowska, 2019). Education for inclusion in school is becoming an important dimension of educator education today (Gołębnik & Pachowicz, 2018). The obligation to employ a support teacher for a pupil with Asperger's syndrome is regulated by the Decree of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the conditions of organising education, upbringing and care for children and young people with disabilities, socially maladjusted and at risk of social maladjustment (Rozporządzenie, 2017). In accordance with § 7 Section 2 of the Decree, in public kindergartens, other forms of pre-school education and public schools where special education is provided for pupils who have a certificate of the need for special education issued due to autism, including Asperger's syndrome, the following specialists are additionally employed: teachers with qualifications in special education in order to co-organise the education of disabled pupils or specialists or persons for the position of a support teacher. The decree does not explicitly use the term "a support teacher", but this is the term most commonly used in practice.

The basic tasks of a support teacher are listed in § 7.7 of the decree. According to it, a support teacher: (1) conducts educational activities together with other teachers and together with other teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups, carries out integrated activities and classes specified in IPET [Individual Educational-Therapeutic Programme]; (2) conducts educational work with disabled students together with other teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups; (3) participates – as appropriate – in educational activities conducted by other teachers and in integrated activities and activities, specified in IPET, implemented by teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups; (4) provides assistance to teachers

conducting educational activities and to teachers, specialists and educators of educational groups implementing integrated activities and activities, specified in IPET, in the selection of forms and methods of work with students with disabilities; (5) conducts remedial, rehabilitation and sociotherapeutic activities.

As it results from the above decree, a support teacher in Poland co-organises the education of children/pupils with disabilities. This provision also results in their role in the group/class, which is co-organisation, i.e. undertaking joint activities with others for the optimal organisation of special education and inclusion of a child/pupil with disabilities in the group/class. The importance of this role for a pupil with a disability is shown by the results of research, which indicates a lower position of the pupil with a disability in the classroom, his or her lower motivation to learn, or low chances of success. This implies that schools are not yet prepared to admit students with disabilities because they cannot provide optimal conditions for their comprehensive development (Chodkowska, 2004; Ćwirynkało, 2003; Osik-Chudowolska, 2008; Paris, 2009; Zamkowska, 2009).

The results of the above research, as well as the Decree of the Minister of National Education of 17 November 2010 on the principles of providing and organising psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions (Rozporządzenie, 2010) allowing the admission of children with a certificate on the need for special education to public schools, and the creation of a uniform core curriculum, made the role of a support teacher particularly important. For a pupil with a certificate on the need for special education issued due to its autism spectrum disorder, a support teacher is of invaluable help. A child with attention deficits and difficulties in social contacts can count on the support of a support teacher, both during lessons and breaks, which affects positively the pupil's behaviour and thus strengthen his or her integration with the class.

Over the years, special programmes have been developed to introduce children from the autism spectrum to the school environment. The first of them describing the introduction of an autistic child by a shadow teacher comes from the work of O. Ivar Lovaas (1987) and from many-year experience of the team of specialists working in the TEACCH system¹. This method is also used in Poland. It is implemented by institutions and facilities for children and young people with autism, as well as special education institutions. However, a shadow teacher in a mainstream school does not have the opportunity to act comprehensively or the knowledge about how to act. He or she often works without a specific plan, intuitively responding to the child's needs. However, due to the fact that the tasks included in the decree indicate the directions of a support teacher's work, which cover three important levels: educational, pedagogical and integration – the aim of the article will be to show how the work of a support teacher with a pupil with Asperger's syndrome looks like in practice in a public school on each of the three levels.

Medical criteria of children with ASD – with regard to the DSM-5 is limited to 11 possible combinations of criteria leading to an ASD diagnosis (McPartland et al., 2012). The latest edition of the DSM, DSM-5, made significant changes to the

diagnostic criteria for autism and related disorders. In DSM-IV, five separate diagnoses were classified under the heading “Pervasive Development Disorders”: Autistic disorder, Asperger Syndrome, Pervasive Development Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. The Pervasive Development Disorder category no longer appears in DSM-5, and Autistic disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and PDD-NOS have now been combined into one label: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

The criteria in the DSM-5 (source: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; DSM-5-TR, 2022) for diagnosing ASD include 3 listed deficits in social communication and social interactions. Clinicians must be sure that these characteristics are not due to developmental delay alone. To be diagnosed with ASD, an individual must meet all three of the following criteria:

1. Difficulties in social emotional reciprocity, including trouble with social approach, back and forth conversation, sharing interests with others, and expressing/understanding emotions.
2. Difficulties in nonverbal communication used for social interaction including abnormal eye-contact and body language and difficulty with understanding the use of nonverbal communication like facial expressions or gestures for communication.
3. Deficits in developing and maintaining relationships with other people (other than with caregivers), including lack of interest in others, difficulties responding to different social contexts, and difficulties in sharing imaginative play with others.

The criteria in the DSM-5 also include demonstrating at least 2 of the following 4 restricted and repetitive behavior, interests, or activities:

1. Stereotyped speech, repetitive motor movements, echolalia (repeating words or phrases, sometimes from television shows or from other people), and repetitive use of objects or abnormal phrases.
2. Rigid adherence to routines, ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviors, and extreme resistance to change (such as insistence on taking the same route to school, eating the same food because of color or texture, repeating the same questions); the individual may become greatly distressed at small changes in these routines.
3. Highly restricted interests with abnormal intensity or focus, such as a strong attachment to unusual objects or obsessions with certain interests, such as train schedules.
4. Increased or decreased reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment, such as not reacting to pain, strong dislike to specific sounds, excessive touching or smelling objects, or fascination with spinning objects.

CASE REPORT

A boy, age 12 years old, a seventh form pupil of one of the primary schools open to the public in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Province. From the moment the diagnosis was made – 4th form of primary school – the boy has been working with a support teacher.

The diagnostic procedure was carried out due to the suggestions of an early school education teacher, pointing to some specific educational needs yet noticed in the pupil and the fact of the boy's isolation from the group of his peers. The teacher also pointed to attention deficits and difficulties with concentration, which may significantly affect the pupil's functioning in school. The diagnosis revealed in the examined person an unharmonious development and a high intelligence quotient with a simultaneous weak development of the social sphere.

In order to obtain in-depth information on the boy's functioning, the individual case method was used. This method allows, among other things, the analysis of specific educational phenomena through the prism of individual human biographies (Pilch & Bauman, 2001, p. 77). In this case it is the best possible way of research. The study included an open interview with the boy's mother and the support teacher, and an analysis of the documents that were issued in connection with the diagnosis. An individual educational and therapeutic programme (IPET) was then constructed, according to which the support teacher is present in all lessons, except art lessons (arts, music, technology, religion) and physical education lessons. Support during the lessons was complemented by two hours of individual work with the pupil per week. During these hours the teacher had the opportunity to offer him tasks related to school matters (e.g. going to the school office, borrowing a book from the library) and to undertake other therapeutic activities supporting the development of social competences and strengthening the self-image.

THE STUDENT FUNCTIONING BEFORE THE DIAGNOSIS (WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF THE SUPPORT TEACHER)

The educational sphere

Since the first form, the school has been a source of great stress for the boy. He was not able to read messages, he did not understand both written instructions for tasks and the teacher's oral instructions. The consequence of this was a lack of task completion and inadequate response in various situations and failure to follow the lessons. In order to overcome the tension during the lesson, the boy often "escaped" into his own world, was far in his thoughts, played with objects from his pencil-case, drew – usually planes. He did not show the desired activity during the lesson, he did not volunteer to give answers. The student also revealed deficits in physical fitness and motor clumsiness. The educational effects were average, and the tension associated with the school was enormous. The frustration caused by these difficulties affected his attitude towards school and learning – he declared that he did not like school. Stress caused by learning failures and difficulties in concentration reduced the child's mood and self-esteem.

The pedagogical sphere

A calm, well-mannered boy. He was one of the withdrawn children, avoiding all contact and social interaction. Despite the fact that some opposition behaviour appeared, such as: stubbornness in sitting alone at a school desk and refusal to sit with a schoolmate – the boy did not cause any major educational problems. The lack of concentration during lessons, which was manifested by playing with objects taken out of the pencil case as well as drawing, can be treated as an educational problem.

The integration sphere

During breaks, the boy did not play with his friends – not only did he not initiate the games, but he refused to participate when invited. He was not able to establish a conversation and maintain the conversation. If he spoke, it was a monologue about his aviation interests. He limited social contacts to the necessary minimum, he was reluctant to take part in class trips, but despite his reluctance he took part in them. The boy was so withdrawn that even borrowing a book on his own from the library made him afraid, but he was able to shop in the local shop without any problems. In general, most of the boy's fears and anxieties were concentrated around the "hated" school, which appeared to be an unfriendly and stressful place.

THE STUDENT'S FUNCTIONING AFTER THE DIAGNOSIS (SUPPORT OF THE SUPPORT TEACHER)

After the boy was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and the appearance of a support teacher, the first effects of support quickly appeared, which were really spectacular. One of the most important was a significant reduction of tension and anxiety related to the school. Further effects in particular spheres were slow and at different times, and for some of them, e.g. the activity in the class, we had to wait two years.

The educational sphere

The tensions associated with studying have decreased significantly. The boy with a sense of support has started to achieve much better results in learning and received a certificate with honours in the fourth form. The teacher has developed an individual system of working with the boy and each year he increasingly strives to make him independent, supporting him in his own educational activity. Since the lack of concentration deficit in the boy is responsible for the inability to react quickly to the teacher's instructions – the support teacher explains the tasks or repeats the instructions during the lesson, making sure that the attention is focused during the explanations. During the course of working together in class it turned out that when the boy has the opportunity to understand the task, there is no problem with solving it or providing answers to questions. The feeling of security associated with the presence of the support teacher also made the boy more active in the lessons and began to volunteer to answer question. More and more often, the boy rejects help during the tests and wants to solve the tasks himself or he is not afraid to ask when

he needs help. At the beginning of the cooperation, the pupil passively followed the teacher's suggestions, was afraid to ask him/her during the lesson about any matter, was even afraid to approach the teacher and give his/her his homework. While solving tasks, he waited for help, without which he did not take up the activity. However, the gradual positive enhancements made it possible for him now, in the seventh form, to receive more and more advantages for his activity in the lesson, and he is not afraid to raise his hand and ask for a repetition when he does not manage to write the task down.

At the moment, a pupil still needs support and explanation of tasks before trying to solve them, and often needs more time to complete them than his peers but he has a much more positive attitude towards the school. Although he still says he does not like the school, he does not refuse to go to school and increasingly returns happy with it. The pupil also continues to 'run away' from reality in class, but after the teacher's gentle intervention – touching his shoulder or saying some words to remind him to focus – he can concentrate on the task. The boy is also still able to say long monologues about his interests, but when he volunteers to speak he is able to answer questions briefly and concisely.

To sum up, the support teacher's tasks included: giving instructions and explaining the subject teacher's instructions, making sure that the pupil focuses his attention on the presented material, intervening in case of distraction, providing quick feedback while performing the tasks and frequent positive reinforcement. An important aspect of support has also proved to be encouraging the student to raise his hand and ask questions during lessons. This process was the longest lasting, and the actual effects of the activities began to appear after two years of support – in the sixth and seventh forms.

The pedagogical sphere

The boy's pedagogical functioning has not changed – he is still a calm pupil, not disturbing in the class. Due to the fact that has to concentrate strongly in order to perform the task – he does not like to be disturbed by noise in the class because it distracts him. In the pedagogical sphere, the work of the support teacher consisted in limiting the boy's ability to play with different objects that he took out of the pencil case during the lesson. The aim of this activity was to keep the student's concentration during the lesson, which (as described in the educational area) – was achieved. Another positive effect of the activities undertaken by the support teacher in this area is to break the boy's resistance to sitting at one desk with another student. At the moment the boy has not only accepted this possibility and sits at the same desk with different children in different lessons but is also happy with this fact.

The integration sphere

There has been a lot of progress in the integration sphere. For example, when a boy is invited to play together during breaks between lessons, he can play with his friends more and more often. Although he still does not initiate games and still spends a lot

of time alone, this is no longer an isolation and seclusion but rather his conscious choice, not due to fear. Despite the fact that the support teacher does not interfere with the time of the break, it seems, however, that it is the educational successes and the self-confidence that the boy has gained from his help that have made him more open to playing together with other children and to integrating with his peer group.

The activities carried out by the support teacher in integration sphere include encouraging and supporting the boy to participate in school trips, as well as involving the boy in games played together with others during school events. Another activity undertaken by the support teacher was to assign certain tasks to the boy, which previously, due to strong fear and shame, were out of his reach. An example of such a task was, for example, the instruction given to the boy to go to the school office during the break between lessons and ask for a puncher, or to go to the library and borrow a book. At the moment, the pupil is doing well – he goes to the library on his own and borrows school books without problems. It would seem that the examples of tasks described above are trivial in terms of their level of difficulty, but for a child with autism spectrum disorders, it is a great achievement in social contacts.

SUMMARY

The work of the support teacher with the pupil with Asperger's syndrome has improved his functioning in the educational, pedagogical and integrative sphere. The most important effect of the activities undertaken by the teacher was to provide the boy with a sense of security, and thus a huge increase in self-esteem, which consequently affected all areas of his functioning.

From the point of view of school success, it was particularly important to improve educational results and social functioning. Thanks to the support and constant positive reinforcements from the support teacher, the boy started to achieve small educational successes, which visibly led to increased motivation to learn and willingness to establish social contacts. From a closed, withdrawn child, uncertain of his skills, exposed to constant educational failures, the boy became more confident, and as his self-confidence increased, so did his willingness to play together and be more open to the group.

Currently, the boy still faces many limitations. School is still not his favourite place, but only because he has to learn and do homework when going to school, not because he is experiencing educational failure. Work should also continue to improve his social functioning and further integration into the group (because it is not at a level comparable to that of children of his age), but evaluating the differences between what has been and what is currently being observed, enormous progress can be seen.

In conclusion, the introduction of a support teacher to education undoubtedly contributes to ensuring that pupils with autism, including Asperger's syndrome, and pupils with conjugated disabilities, attending public educational units, are provided with activities that meet their individual development and educational needs, which

leads to better functioning in school, overcoming barriers and educational success. A significant role is also played by their cooperation with the parents of these pupils, in which he or she provides advice and guidance on how to work with the child at home. Close cooperation with the child's parents also makes it possible to establish consistent actions and respond adequately in difficult situations. A suggestion for educational practitioners, especially teachers working with a child with Asperger's syndrome, is to strive for the student's educational success. Usually, after a series of failures, including those in the social sphere, small educational successes strengthen self-esteem, allow obtaining a higher status in the peer group and, consequently, for building new social relationships and opening up to new experiences. Lack of educational success may effectively block a child's development in other areas as well. As Ewa Pisula (2005) underlines that there are different working methods with people with autism of different ages and needs (m.in. "floor time" in working with a child with autism, bibliotherapy, dog therapy, hippotherapy). The most important thing is to match a child with perfect method.

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**PRACA Z UCZNIEM Z ZESPOŁEM ASPERGERA W ZAKRESIE EDUKACYJNYM,
WYCHOWAWCZYM I INTEGRACYJNYM – Z PRAKTYKI NAUCZYCIELA
WSPOMAGAJĄCEGO**

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu było przedstawienie długofalowych działań podejmowanych przez nauczyciela wspomagającego w ramach pracy z uczniem z zespołem Aspergera w szkole ogólnodostępnej. Analizie poddano 7-letni czas nauki ucznia w szkole, od klasy pierwszej do klasy siódmej, z uwzględnieniem podziału na okres przed wprowadzeniem nauczyciela wspomagającego i po wprowadzeniu nauczyciela wspomagającego. Po włączeniu do pracy z uczniem nauczyciela wspomagającego zaobserwowano istotne efekty pozytywne w trzech sferach funkcjonowania ucznia, tj. w sferze edukacyjnej, sferze wychowawczej oraz sferze integracyjnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: zespół Aspergera, uczeń, praca nauczyciela wspomagającego