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## THE STUDENT THROUGH BRONFENBRENNER'S "GLASSES" – TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FROM A MICRO- AND MESOSYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

UCZEŃ W „OKULARACH” BRONFENBRENNERA –  
WIEDZA NAUCZYCIELI NA TEMAT UCZNIÓW  
ZE SPECJALNYMI POTRZEBAMI EDUKACYJNYMI  
Z PERSPEKTYWY MIKRO- I MEZOSYSTEMOWEJ


**Keywords:**  
special educational  
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cational environment

**Summary:** As systematically published statistical data show, 67% of students with special educational needs attend public and integrated schools in Poland. This means that every – or close to every – teacher meets in their professional career students with diverse development conditions or learning disabilities that create special educational needs. For the effective organization of the education process of these students, it is crucial not only to gain knowledge about the characteristics of the students themselves, but also about the environment of their upbringing, as well as interactions between the basic microsystems in which the students are “nested.” This article presents the results of in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted with twelve teachers, the purpose of which was to gain insight into

**Słowa kluczowe:**  
specjalne potrzeby edukacyjne, bioekologiczna teoria rozwoju człowieka, teoria Bronfenbrennera, wiedza nauczycieli na temat uczniów, środowisko wychowawcze i edukacyjne

what knowledge about the development and functioning of specific students with special educational needs is declared by the surveyed pedagogues. As the basic theoretical framework, I used Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of bioecological human development, which captures human development in concentrically arranged systems: the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem. In this article, I presented data on the teachers' declared knowledge from the micro- and mesosystemic perspective. The results of the conducted research indicate that the surveyed teachers often have incomplete and sometimes even incorrect knowledge about their students with special educational needs, use similar methods of supporting students despite their diverse needs, and regularly leave most of the support activities for support teachers, seeing their own roles primarily as leading teachers.

**Streszczenie:** Jak pokazują systematycznie publikowane dane statystyczne, 67% uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi uczęszcza w Polsce do szkół ogólnodostępnych i integracyjnych. Oznacza to, że każdy lub prawie każdy nauczyciel spotyka się w swojej karierze zawodowej z uczniami ze zróżnicowanymi możliwościami rozwojowymi i w uczeniu się, które powodują powstanie specjalnych potrzeb edukacyjnych. Dla skutecznej organizacji i przebiegu procesu kształcenia tych uczniów kluczowa jest nie tylko wiedza dotycząca cech samych uczniów, lecz także środowiska ich wychowania, jak również interakcje między podstawowymi mikrosystemami, w których uczeń bezpośrednio uczestniczy. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wyniki przeprowadzonych z dwanaściorcem nauczycieli indywidualnych pogłębionych wywiadów etnograficznych, których celem było zdobycie orientacji w tym, jaką wiedzę dotyczącą uwarunkowań rozwoju i funkcjonowania konkretnych uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi deklarują badani. Jako podstawę konstruowania dyspozycji do wywiadów wykorzystałam teorię bioekologicznego rozwoju człowieka Uriego Bronfenbrennera, która ujmuje rozwój człowieka w koncentrycznie ułożonych systemach: mikro-, mezo-, egzo-, makro- i chronosystemie. W niniejszym artykule zaprezentowałam dane dotyczące deklarowanej wiedzy nauczycieli z perspektywy mikro- i mezosystemowej. Wyniki przeprowadzonych badań wskazują na to, że zdarza się, iż badani nauczyciele posiadają o swoich uczniach ze specjalnymi



potrzebami edukacyjnymi wiedzę niepełną, a czasami nawet błędną, stosują podobne sposoby wspierania uczniów mimo ich zróżnicowanych potrzeb, a także, że najchętniej pozostawiają większość działań wspierających w gestii nauczycieli pomagających, widząc swoją rolę przede wszystkim jako nauczycieli tzw. wiodących.

## Introduction

As successively published statistics show, 67% of students with special educational needs<sup>1</sup> (SEN) attend public and integrated<sup>2</sup> schools in Poland. It can, therefore, be assumed that in every school and almost every class there are children and young people whose educational needs exceed (*in minus* or *in plus*) the level generally described as average. Every – or close to every – teacher, regardless of the stage of upbringing and education which is their area of expertise (kindergarten, primary school: grades 1–3 or 4–8, secondary school, etc.) comes across children and young people with special needs resulting from a disability or other causes (e.g., social maladjustment, specific learning difficulties, environmental negligence, adaptation difficulties, but also specific abilities, etc.) which differentiate both the educational offer for and educational requirements of individual pupils. Studies of the educational process of SEN students show that a clear overall assessment of their learning outcomes is, if not impossible, at least very difficult and uncertain. This

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<sup>1</sup> “Special educational needs are needs which, in the course of the development of children and young people, result from their disability or from other causes of learning difficulties” (*Reform of Education of Pupils with Special Educational Needs*, 1998, p. 11). It is worth adding that although the term “special educational needs” is already widely known in the educational environment, it has never been an official term. It functions only in common language and scientific studies, while in legal regulations on educational law the term “individual development and educational needs” is used (Olechowska, 2016, pp. 29–30).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Central Statistical Office’s *Small Statistical Yearbook of Poland* (2018), in the school year 2016/2017, 73,311 students were educated in primary schools, including 24,298 (33.14%) in special primary schools. The situation was similar in the school year 2017/2018 – at that time a total of 93,417 students were educated in primary schools, including 30,605 special schools (32.76%).

difficulty is emphasised by Grzegorz Szumski (2019, p. 72) who asserts, if only in the context of students with disabilities, that “they constitute a very heterogeneous group. They differ not only in the type of disability, but also in its degree, comorbidities, family environment and other factors which may affect educational achievement.” Groups of pupils with other types of special educational needs not related to disabilities are also very heterogeneous. Taking, for example, a fairly large group of students with specific learning difficulties, it is known that some of them have difficulties reading, others writing, others both at the same time, each with a slightly different degree of difficulty and to a slightly different extent. Students with learning disorders in the field of mathematics are confronted with yet another type of difficulty, each with a slightly different cause and effect profile, including a different degree of difficulty, its duration, extent, and so on. Such insights lead to the unequivocal conclusion that the functioning of individual students in the school and classroom space is so unique that it almost renders it impossible to generalise or compare the multi-faceted contexts of student activity and educational outcomes. Since it is, therefore, hardly possible to use ready-made recipes and unified solutions, what is the secret to the educational success of students with special educational needs?

One of the basic determinants of the effectiveness of the educational process, as well as of the construction of the learning environment in which it takes place, is the **knowledge** that the teacher has of “the pupil, their psychophysical development, family environment and other conditions that have a significant influence on their learning outcomes, achievements, and behavior” (Knap-Stefaniuk, 2017, p. 200). This is a necessary condition for designing a sustainable, optimal learning environment, which would not only ensure that the student reaches the maximum of their abilities, but would also help build their self-esteem and confidence, effectively take advantage of their intellectual potential in a diversified group, as well as help the teacher properly select and verify their own teaching strategies (cf. Knap-Stefaniuk, 2017, p. 204). Student development does not take place in a vacuum; on the contrary, the space of upbringing and education in which the child functions as a student is a complex network of connections between many systems, and each of them is characterized by unique characteristics and dynamics.

What knowledge do teachers have about the individual circumstances and characteristics of the difficulties specific SEN students face? In this article, I will present the results of research conducted to answer this question. The study,

however, will not adopt a standard theoretical framework – for example, the teacher's knowledge of the assessment of individual student developmental spheres or individual characteristics of their academic skills – but will use Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development. This researcher pointed out the particular importance of the interaction between different environments in which each person is directly or indirectly *nested*.

According to Bronfenbrenner's assumptions, human development is influenced not only by factors that are present in individual environments (family, kindergarten, school, etc.), but also by the relations between these environments, their mutual conditioning or hierarchical, two-way relationships. Bronfenbrenner also proved and explained how human development can change over time under the influence of various factors in the social environment. According Bronfenbrenner, however, the social environment is not limited to its immediate surroundings, but encompasses the entirety of the extremely complex and time-changing historical, economic, social and cultural conditions in which each individual human being is involved at particular moments of their life. It turns out that in order to have knowledge **about the student** as such, it is necessary to have an understanding not only of the student, for instance, from the pedagogical, psychological and biological point of view, but also of their **environment** and the various **contexts and interactions** both between **the student and the environment**, and between the **individual ecological systems** that create this environment. Bronfenbrenner, in describing the ecological environment as a set of structures nested in one another (1979, p. 3; cf. Figure 1 below), points out the areas in which the determinants of an individual's development are located and, consequently, the types of conditions one should know if one participates in this development, especially in the role of educator and teacher. By placing the **microsystem** at the centre of the system (1979, p. 7), Bronfenbrenner endows it with particular significance. It includes the individual and the complex interactions between them and the family microsystem as well as the institutional microsystem (if applicable) which is the immediate context of their development. It is in the microsystems that the individual physically exists and actively participates. In the family home microsystem, the first experience of the world takes place and, woven into the daily rhythm of the family life, the first episodes of learning. Goldstein (2008) recalls that in Bronfenbrenner's theory, as in Vygotsky's concept, learning and development take place in a specific historical-cultural environment determined by socio-political forces. Vygotsky repeatedly stressed

that a young child learns mainly through interaction with other people in their immediate environment; everything they learn is coloured by the expectations and norms of the specific socio-cultural context in which they are situated (Cole et al., 1978).

When a child enters the next microsystem (pre-school, school, etc.), a confrontation between two very important forces takes place. These are the readiness of the individual to start functioning and education in the new microsystem, and the readiness of this microsystem to raise and educate the individual. This phenomenon takes place each time during the successive *ecological transitions*, at the beginning of primary school, middle school or secondary school, then at the start of professional career, change of workplace, etc., namely, every time the borders of successive microsystems are crossed.

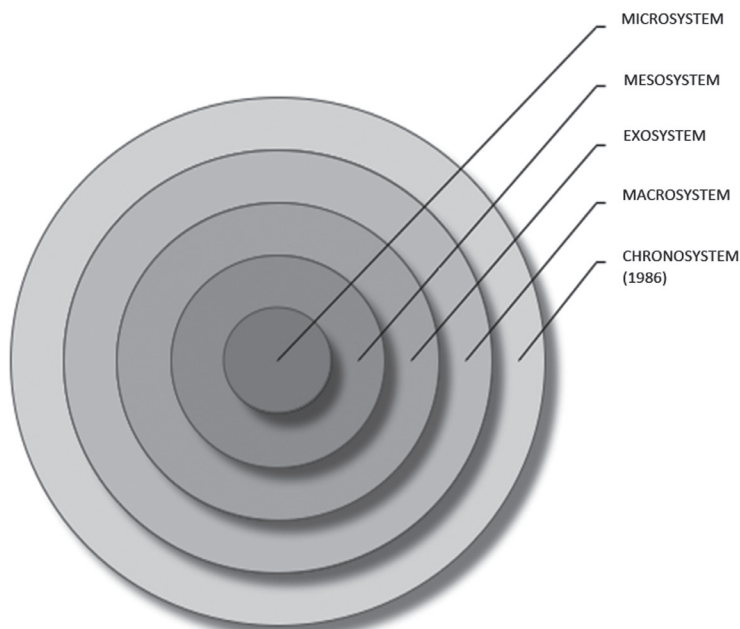


Figure 1.

A model of bioecological model of human development.

Source: own study based on Bronfenbrenner, 1979.

The processes taking place in different environments are not independent of each other. Events taking place in the student's family home affect their learning at school and vice versa. This type of interaction between microsystems

Bronfenbrenner calls the **mesosystem**. For a child these can be interactions between home, school and peers, for adults, interactions between family, work and social life. A mesosystem is created or expanded every time an individual moves into a new environment. In this way it becomes a system of microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this context, the researcher points out, among other things, that "the child's ability to learn to read at the elementary level may depend no less on how the child is taught, than on what the relationship between school and home is" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the strength and consequences of interactions between areas in which the individual is not physically present have as much impact as the strength and consequences of interactions taking place in their immediate environment. Events taking place in these environments also affect the developing individual. Therefore, the author proposes to include a third level of the ecological environment, covering even further areas, namely, those in which the developing individual is not directly "nested."

One or more environments in which the individual does not actively participate, Bronfenbrenner (1979) calls an **exosystem**. Although it does not directly affect the individual, the exosystem is also important for their development. According to the researcher, in modern, industrialised societies, there are three exosystems that have a fundamental influence on family processes: the parents' working environment, the parents' circle of acquaintances and social influences which impact family functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Other environments of the same type include the influence of the kindergarten group or school class attended by older siblings, as well as the management environment of a given school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The patterns of environments vary according to socioeconomic, ethnic, religious and other subcultural conditions that reflect faith and lifestyle and preserve the specificity of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Another system identified by Bronfenbrenner is the **macrosystem** which refers to the impact of systems further away from the centre (political, economic, educational, social, economic, etc.) on all closer systems (i.e., micro-, meso- and exo-) that exist or may exist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, whether the child's level of development at any given time corresponds to the requirements formulated for them at a given educational level depends in part on, among other things, the educational programme and the competences of the teachers, which have already been decided without the child's participation at the macro-system level.

In the studies on human development, the passage of time used to be seen as synonymous with chronological age. Since the early 1970s, however, there has been a change in this respect, because time has begun to be understood not only in relation to the course of a person's life, but also in relation to changes in their living environment and, even more importantly, in relation to the dynamic relationship between the two processes. In order to distinguish these inquiries from more traditional longitudinal studies focusing on human beings, Bronfenbrenner (1986) proposes to use the term **chronosystem** which takes into account the possible impact that changes in one's life environment have on human development over time.

The simplest forms of chronosystem refer to the location of differently conditioned changes (*life transitions*) in an individual's life course. According to Bronfenbrenner, two basic types of such changes can be distinguished: **normative** ones (start of preschool education, start of school education, adolescence, the first job, marriage, retirement) and **non-normative** ones (death or serious illness in the family, divorce, moving house, or winning the sweepstakes) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 724). Their impact may be direct but may also indirectly influence the further life of an individual, becoming an impulse for further developmental changes.

The author also focuses on the two-way interaction between the environments in question, which means that an individual can both influence and be influenced by a given environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In Poland, only recently, has there been a renewed attempt to give particular prominence to the way the educational process is perceived, taking into account a wide range of factors determining its effectiveness. As Ewa Domagała-Zyśk, Tomasz Knopik and Urszula Oszwa (2018, p. 78) put it, the exposure of the role of the environment in the development of children's behaviour is an important novelty. An even greater novelty, however, is the inquiry into the causes and conditions that may exist in further systems than the traditionally perceived social environment reduced to the family or school microsystem (including the peer one). In our cognition of human development there has been a shift from the neo-positivist fragmentation of the mental sphere to separately functioning fields (cognitive, emotional, motivational, social ones) (cf. Domagała-Zyśk, Kopik & Oszwa, 2018, p. 13). Currently, we are observing a similar shift towards a holistic perception of the environment in which a person functions. Such an approach to human development is also strengthened by the widely disseminated model of functional assessment of human development according



to the criteria of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), which goes far beyond the area of formal knowledge about the student that is traditionally acquired by most teachers.

In 1991, the extension of the offer of educational forms for students with disability certificates resulted in a twofold change in the rules and functioning of the educational system. The more visible one consisted in granting children with an evaluation for special education the right to attend the school closest to home (either a public or an integrated one). The second, of which we are less often aware, resulted in the distinction of groups of students with differently conditioned learning difficulties within a class. However, this change concerned children and young people who were from the start students of a given school. The learning difficulties of these two groups of children and young people were labeled special educational needs. This resulted, among other things, in placing this category of pupils on the borderline between pedagogy and special pedagogy, which is worth pointing out here, although it goes beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, students with special educational needs – those who were identified in existing student groups, and those who came to these groups from quite hermetic, often stigmatised environments – became, almost overnight, a group covered by special recommendations for teachers. Special requirements were formulated for the teachers to adapt the organisation, methods, forms and means of education to the students' needs and capabilities. However, in order for these measures to be effective, extensive knowledge of teachers about the specific difficulties of individual students (or how they function) is required. That is why I was particularly interested in what knowledge they, in fact, have. I did not, however, focus on information obtained from evaluations or opinions issued by specialists in psychological-educational counselling centres, but applied a completely new approach to this problem, namely one that is guided by the assumptions of Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory.

When looking at the development of the child with special educational needs through "Bronfenbrenner glasses", it is necessary to take into account not only the individual characteristics of the child or their environment, but also the complex, hierarchical and two-way relationship between these environments. The child with special educational needs is born into a particular

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<sup>3</sup> This aspect is discussed in more detail by, among others, Iwona Chrzanowska (2018) in her book *Special Pedagogy. From Tradition to the Present*.

microsystem. They grow in it, and it provides them with a specific context for development. However, as Bronfenbrenner has proved in his work, the impact to which the child will be subjected within this microsystem depends not only on the socio-economic conditions of the family, but also, for example, on how – and with whom – the parents talk about their child. What matters is who, how, at what point in the child's life draws the parents' attention to the perceived symptoms of specific difficulties their child has. What consequences does it have? Do the parents turn to someone for information or help? Who is it? When does this happen? Who (how and where) helps them? Who supports the parents in the process of their child's development? What results does it bring? Who – if anyone – works systematically with parents, providing them with the necessary expertise to help them to better understand the developmental or learning difficulties of their child? When the child begins pre-school or school education, how does the relationship between the original family microsystem and the new institutional microsystem of education and teaching look? Is such an *ecological transition* punctual or untimely in relation to the child's age? In a word, does the child start pre-school education or schooling at the usual statutory time? Do they start it before or after this time? As a result of whose decision, taken on what legal basis, with what personal, institutional, economic (local government, state) support does it happen? With whom in the institution (kindergarten, school) or outside of it, for what purpose and to what effect do parents/guardians of the child establish relationships? There are many more such questions to be asked. Such aspects as micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystemic aspects are precisely what Bronfenbrenner points out in the context of human development. And such relational aspects of the functioning of the student with special educational needs have interested me in the research this article details.

The study I have undertaken, on the basis of Bronfenbrenner's theory, has no precursors (or I have not been able to find them). Teachers' knowledge is discussed primarily from the perspective of their competences, the tasks they are entrusted with or the functions they perform, distinguishing their various classifications and characteristics (Żukowska, 1993; Dylak, 1995; Dudzikowa, 1996; Denek, 1998; Konarzewski, 1998; Okoń, 1999; Duraj-Nowakowa, 2000; Kwiatkowska & Lewowicki, 1997, and many others). However, as I have already mentioned, I have not yet found any research on what knowledge of ecological systems of human development teachers in general – and SEN teachers in particular – have. Having recognised that

the modern education system should aim to take into account the broad context of the development of children and young people – as it is necessary for the optimal design of the education process and evaluation of its effectiveness – I have attempted to analyse the issues related to teachers' knowledge of environmental conditions for learning and the functioning of students with special educational needs. Such a study seems to be all the more justified as many new recommendations concerning the comprehensive knowledge of the student have recently been introduced in the acts of education law. One of the basic documents requiring consideration of a wide range of factors determining the development and functioning of students is *the Ministry of National Education Ordinance of 9 August 2019, as amended, on the principles of organising and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions*, which states that “psychological and pedagogical assistance provided to a pupil in kindergarten, school and institution consists in recognising and satisfying individual development and educational needs of the pupil and **recognising individual psychophysical abilities and environmental factors influencing their functioning in this institution** [bold type A.O.] in order to support the pupil's development potential and create conditions for their active and full participation in the life of kindergarten, school, and social environment” (Article 2 [1]). Provisions sanctioning **cooperation with student's parents and specialists providing psychological and pedagogical assistance, tasks of supporting student's parents, or the scope of cooperation with psychological and pedagogical counselling centres** [bold type A.O. ] are also discussed, *inter alia*, in the *Ordinance of the Ministry of National Education of 21 May 2001 on the framework statutes of public kindergartens and public schools*, or the *Ordinance of the Ministry of National Education of 24 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*.

These teacher responsibilities, as well as the tasks of the kindergarten, schools and other institutions concerning the organisation and course of student education, should, therefore, lead to the accumulation of broad knowledge about students. Such knowledge is understood not only as a formal collection of information, but also as a necessary basis for the proper course of the education process.

## Method

Presenting the acquired information concerning the declared knowledge of teachers about the bioecological conditions of development and functioning of their students with special educational needs, I focused on the microsystem and the mesosystem as the two systems which are the closest to the student. I have also assumed that for the purpose of this article and due to its limited scope, it would be more interesting to discuss parts of the results obtained in more detail than to present all the areas of the data obtained in a perfunctory way.

In the course of my research, I intended to obtain data on the knowledge of teachers about the bioecological conditions of development and functioning of their SEN students. I strived to achieve this goal by trying to answer the main question, namely, what kind of knowledge concerning the bioecological conditions of development and functioning of specific SEN students is declared by the teachers surveyed? In collecting information on teachers' knowledge of selected bioecological environments, I formulated detailed questions from which I selected the following two to be discussed here concerning only the ecological systems which are the closest to the students:

1. What knowledge about microsystemic conditions for the development and functioning of specific students with special educational needs is declared by the teachers surveyed?
2. What knowledge of the mesosystemic conditions of development and functioning of specific students with special educational needs is declared by the teachers surveyed?

I carried out qualitative field research, using an in-depth ethnographic interview in the form of free targeted interview as a research technique. I conducted a total of 12 individual interviews, following the interview instructions with a generally defined list of my information needs (cf. Konecki, 2000, pp. 169–170). The list of information needs corresponded to four categories of Bronfenbrenner's model of permanent forms of interaction: person – process – context – time. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents and then subjected to detailed transcription. Respondents were selected deliberately – the selection criterion was the fact of working with a SEN student in a class group a given school year. The group of respondents consisted of 12 teachers in public schools with work experience ranging from 3 to 33 years, working with students with special educational needs for

as long as 2 to 7 years. Half of the respondents were teachers from grades 1–3 and the other half were teachers, including tutors, from grades 4–8. Even though all the respondents had a master's degree and most of them also had some post-graduate qualifications, the majority of them had no preparation in special pedagogy (only two teachers worked as co-organisers of education for students with disabilities).

## Results

The first area of information analysed in this article concerning the bioecological conditions of development and functioning of students with special educational needs included the teachers' declarations of their knowledge at the individual level, concerning two-way, micro-systemic features and direct interactions of the student, together with their biological background or language, but also the structure of the family or parents' beliefs concerning upbringing (the pedagogic system).

The analysis of the obtained answers showed that most of the surveyed teachers roughly knew the biological conditions of development and functioning of their students with special educational needs. However, many of the respondents were unable to provide the correct name for the specific type of their students' special educational needs, nor were they sure which group of special educational needs their students' needs should have been included in. An apt illustration of this type of knowledge of the teachers surveyed may be a statement made by a physical education teacher who, in order to answer the question, had to go over the categories of special educational needs listed in the relevant MEN regulation:

I do not think there is one that fits one hundred percent, but I would most aptly describe number four, that is to say, behavioural or emotional disorders or disabilities, because I do not know how autism is perceived (teacher 6).

All the teachers surveyed declared that all their SEN students had a special educational needs statement. Meanwhile, out of the 12 pupils covered by the survey, two could not have been granted one (a pupil with specific learning difficulties and a pupil with behaviour and emotion disorders). Similarly, most of the teachers claimed that their students with special educational needs used the so-called individualised learning pathway. Meanwhile, an individualised educational pathway can be prepared only for students who do not have a special

educational needs statement (Individual Education and Therapy Programme is prepared for them instead). These two possibilities are, therefore, mutually exclusive, but the teachers surveyed remained unaware of it.

All the teachers surveyed indicated the time specific pupils were included in the group of SEN students. However, not everyone was sure if their knowledge was complete, and many doubts were raised:

As far as I know, since kindergarten. I don't have much information about the earlier decision... whether this decision was earlier, but as far as I know, it's only been since kindergarten (teacher 11).

Already in kindergarten (yyyy), the first decision was made in kindergarten and then in the next stages of learning. That is what I think. (pause) From what I know, it follows that somewhere around (yyyy), five years old (yyyy), he received the first diagnosis (teacher 12).

Most of the respondents provided a lot of information about the features of their pupils' family microsystem, such as family structure, difficulties of other family members in learning (especially siblings), people from the family who are most involved in school work with the child and maintain contact with the school, or why other family members do not do it. Some of the teachers' statements suggest that their knowledge is very detailed and accurate (e.g., they know that the child was adopted), while others show that some teachers are surprised by questions about the so-called environmental conditions of development and functioning of their pupils:

I have no idea. I have no idea, I do not know, I do not know what kind of difficulties he had, I can only guess that they were the same ones which granted him the statement, but I do not know (teacher 12).

The answers given by the respondents to the questions concerning the interaction between students in the school microsystem show that the teachers surveyed engage fully-abled students in helping those with special educational needs. However, this assistance is likely to consist merely of not laughing at – and of showing understanding for – the SEN student's difficulties. Most often, the student sits at the desk with a support teacher or a shadow person, not with a colleague.

The teachers surveyed usually know that students with special educational needs, in particular, should be provided with psychological and pedagogical

assistance in the so-called current work. However, the majority of leading or subject teachers claim that it is the task of the support teacher. They are also able to identify many other people obliged to help a given student. For example, they say

So, they have a support teacher who, who helps them with every educational activity, is in every class with them. In addition, they have meetings with the school psychologist at least once a week and classes with the school counselor. Sometimes, when the situation demands it, there is *ad hoc* help organised for them. From time to time, they also have group classes; there are 3, sometimes 4 people who work with them in one class (teacher 10).

Despite the fact that the students covered by statements have very different special educational needs, the teachers mentioned the same ways of providing them with psychological and pedagogical assistance, namely, an extension of working time, dividing longer instructions into chunks, shortening the text to be taught by heart, individualized instructions, and boosting the student's motivation.

When asked if and how, in their opinion, the process of psychological and pedagogical assistance could be improved, the teachers made some demands in this respect:

The conditions for conducting remedial classes are inadequate, there is no specialist equipment, no teaching aids, most of the teaching materials I was forced to buy on my own (teacher 3).

Yes, I believe that the boy should still go to pedagogical therapy classes and work on focusing attention, on his work pace, and on reading with understanding (teacher 7).

I think I would like to be able to do more with the pupil than just support them in their education. Maybe in the form of some extra hour, for example, after lessons. I, as a teacher who works with the pupil on an ongoing basis, we see each other every day, I have a completely different... I have a completely different relationship with them than those who work with them once a week. That is why I think it would be advisable for such a person who works with a pupil every day to also have a greater pedagogic influence on the pupil (teacher 9).

However, they usually did not see the need for improvement and responded in the following ways:

In my opinion, there is no need to change anything, what we have is enough (teacher 5).

No, I do not see a need, because, as I said, I see great progress, and I think that this progress is so obvious that there is no need to change what already works (teacher 6).

No, I think he is working so well at the moment that there is no need for a change. He is doing very well both with the psychologist and the teacher (teacher 10).

The second area of information obtained and analysed in this article was the declarations of the teachers surveyed concerning the organisational level, as regards the relations between micro-systems, including those belonging to micro-systems in which the child is directly *nested*. These are indirect relationships, such as between the child's parents, the child's parents and siblings, their parents and teachers or specialists, as well as between different teachers who are members of another microsystem (schools, clinics, etc.).

In this area, the respondents described the cooperation between leading teachers and support teachers who co-organize the educational process as particularly good. However, what also emerged from the respondents' statements is that it is the support teacher – rather than the leading one – who contacts the child's parents in order to obtain important and current information about the student. The role of the support teacher cannot be overestimated, as evidenced by many statements of the teachers surveyed:

Here, there has to be close cooperation; it seems to me that it cannot be that the support teacher does their own work, it all has to be done in agreement with the leading teacher, every modification has to be analysed, the adaptation of tests, the current topic has to be reviewed and adjusted, read and here, there has to be very close cooperation (teacher 4).

I think that... as staff, we respect each other very much and try to ensure that there are no clashes between us. If there is no clash between us, then the pupils also react better, so there must be unanimity between us. That is the principle, so if we work in class, we try to make sure that... there is a person who leads the way, in all of this, and I am the person who possibly supports. Yes... but we always consult. I don't have such difficulties here, it is difficult for me to say (teacher 10).



The teachers surveyed had far more reservations about cooperation with their students' parents:

It is different with parents, mum says one thing and then says another, sometimes that it's better, another time that it's worse (teacher 1).

As far as I am aware, more information about this, about difficulties and progress, is given to the support teacher. And it is not from a parent that I know this, but it is the support teacher who is telling me that they are asking for an extension of the deadline for learning a poem or something, because all such information goes directly to the support teacher, and I only find out as the third person (teacher 11).

## Conclusions

The teacher's knowledge of the student is one of the basic conditions for the proper planning and effective conduct of the educational process. Teachers' knowledge of students with special educational needs may even determine the success of the whole process or its painful failure. Special educational needs constitute a wide group of non-homogeneous educational needs, which require a good understanding and a varied way of supporting individual students. The knowledge of teachers in the field of micro- and mesosystemic conditions of development and functioning of children is, therefore, one of the foundations of the modern educational process, implemented with the increasing participation of students with special educational needs in public schools and integrated classrooms.

The analysis of statements made by teachers in ethnographic interviews concerning their knowledge about the micro- and mesosystemic conditions of development and functioning of students with special educational needs with whom they work leaves me with a certain amount of dissatisfaction. It is good that the teachers in general have *some* knowledge about their pupils, but it is a pity that this knowledge is often incomplete or incorrect. Many of the teachers surveyed are not fully aware of the types of special educational needs and the resulting diverse needs of their pupils, and the subsequent need to take diverse support measures. Many of them claim that actions supporting the development and learning of students are primarily the responsibility of support teachers, and that current work with students with special educational

needs does not require constant changes and improvement of the process of providing psychological and pedagogical assistance – it is good as it is.

Pupils with special educational needs are a special group of students in public schools. Only very broad knowledge of their complex situations and individualised measures to support their development and learning can produce optimum results. Until such knowledge is widespread and applied in pedagogical practice, pupils with special educational needs will not have the chance to develop and reach the height of their educational abilities. The results of my research suggest, however, that regardless of the fact that thirty years have passed since the idea of integrated learning started to be popularized in Poland, and despite the recent turn towards inclusive education, we are still quite a long way from its successful implementation.

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