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## FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT IN TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IN THE SPECIALIST INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SUPPORT CENTERS. RESEARCH REPORT\*

**Introduction:** In June 2023, the pilot program for implementing the first Specialist Inclusive Education Support Centers into the Polish educational practice concluded. The authors conducted evaluative research within the Specialist Inclusive Education Support Centers (SIESCs) in Łódź, Poland.

**Research Aim:** The purpose of the research aim was to evaluate the support provided to teachers in mainstream educational institutions, and the purpose of the article was to show the experience of conducting functional assessment in recognizing the diverse needs of students.

**Method:** The research method employed was focused group interviews with teachers and school principals, along with content analysis of the opinions expressed by participants in the self-study network.

**Results:** The research results are their selected statements, evaluating against different areas of support, the experience of using school functional assessment.

**Conclusions:** The conclusions of the research confirm teachers' concerns about functional assessment, perceived as a new form of educational diagnosis, but also highlight significant needs in this area arising from the inclusive approach in the Polish education system. The staff of special schools serving as SIESCs, can be instrumental in implementing the functional assessment process for inclusion purposes.

**Keywords:** education, inclusion, functional assessment, support, teacher's diagnosis

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## INTRODUCTION

The political transformation of the 1990s in Poland brought significant changes to the Polish education system. Among these changes was the creation of opportunities for non-segregated education for students with disabilities in so-called integrated classes. This led to a rapid shift of the population of these students from special schools to mainstream schools (for example, in 1997–1999, their number in mainstream schools increased from 14,500 to nearly 25,000 – Krause, 2004). However, the early years of education in this form were not easy. The development of inclusive education system faced resistance from both teachers and parents of other students. Research pointed to numerous problems and barriers, resulting primarily from the lack of proper preparation of schools and teachers, insufficient support from specialists such as psychologists, speech therapists, and therapists, as well as the absence of special educators in mainstream schools (Bąbka, 2001; Krause 2000, 2004 and others). Nevertheless, this period was primarily about gathering the first experiences related to the education of students with disabilities in non-segregated settings, both positive and negative experiences. Both categories were equally important in the process of further changes. Despite the development of the integration and later the inclusion movement around the world, it became clear that despite foreign models and emerging paradigmatic agreements on the essence and value of non-segregated education, each country had to find its own path, including trials and errors.

Conclusions drawn from these experiences were used to improve the education system. Inclusive education in Poland was a certain transitional stage from special education to inclusive education (Wdówik, 2008). Educational inclusion was even seen as “enhanced and expanded integration” (Szumski, 2010, p. 13), although it is not the only and most appropriate way to describe the relationship between these two concepts. Most significant, however, are the further changes in the Polish educational system related to the penetration of the idea of inclusion. This was undoubtedly related to the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, which guaranteed inclusive education for these individuals at all levels of education (Waszkielewicz, 2008; Wdówik, 2008). The signing of the Convention by the President of Poland in 2012 accelerated the process of introducing inclusion into Polish schools. Formally, inclusive education was introduced through a package of regulations of the Minister of National Education in 2010, but – as with integrated education – legal solutions outpaced the preparations of schools and teachers to face the challenges posed by opening mainstream institutions not only to children and youth with disabilities but also to those with diverse educational needs arising from other reasons. Unfortunately, despite the two-year period of work by the team of experts in special educational needs (2009–2010), appointed by the Ministry of National Education at that time, comprehensive and systemic solutions developed during that time were not implemented in practice. Organizational and legal decisions did not take into account the lack of



preparedness of teachers for the tasks ahead. Formal inclusive education was possible, but schools and preschools lacked models of action, and teachers lacked real support. However, it was necessary to work towards professionalizing inclusion, to realistically equip mainstream schools and their teachers with the competencies and tools to recognize and meet the diverse needs of students.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SPECIALIST INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SUPPORT CENTERS

In 2017, the Polish Ministry of Education (MEN) formed another team dedicated to inclusive education (Jachimczak and Podgórska-Jachnik, 2022), which developed the “Model of Education for All” (MEN, 2020). This model described the expected functioning of schools and preschools, taking into account the diversity of students. Unlike previous initiatives that did not consider the lack of preparation of teachers in mainstream schools, the Model also acknowledged the challenge of providing real, specialized support for them and recommended the creation of institutions to support educational institutions in the field of inclusive education (MEN, 2020). Based on this, works began in 2019 on the model of operation of Specialist Inclusive Education Support Centers (SIESC), and in the following years, the first 23 SIESCs in Poland were piloted (www2). It is worth noting the pioneering formula of the designed support model. This is because SIESCs are created on the basis of special institutions, which in some countries were subject to liquidation when inclusive education began to dominate the educational system. Although the number of special schools in Poland has also declined, about one-third of students with special education evaluations still attend them today. However, special schools, as SIESCs, have gained a new role: by sharing their experience and working methods, each SIESC provides support to several preschools and schools in working with students with diverse educational needs (both students with disabilities and others requiring special support, in line with the understanding of inclusive education as education for all). The transfer of knowledge and experience in the relationship “teachers of special schools – teachers of inclusive schools” as an innovative solution in the educational system has proved to be an apt solution for managing the resources of teaching staff and improving the quality of education for all (Jachimczak and Podgórska-Jachnik 2022; Richards, 2016). The authors had the opportunity to work with emerging SIESCs in the project, which was also the subject of their research in action (Jachimczak and Podgórska-Jachnik, 2022). Among other things, they conducted trainings for leaders and coordinators, and participated in the evaluation of the project (Jachimczak et al., 2023). The project, with some modifications, will continue, with another 285 SIESCs planned to be established in the coming years, along with a system for ensuring their quality.

## FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT AS THE FOUNDATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND A NEW (?) DIAGNOSTIC TASK FOR MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

The adoption of a new role by special school teachers as SIESC leaders, required them to expand their existing tasks. Moreover, the developed model of operation was not a straightforward transfer of the way work was done in special schools to mainstream schools. Instead, it required the joint development of new solutions within the context of inclusion. After all, inclusive education is based primarily on the search for common didactic solutions for diverse groups (universal design), taking into account the multiplicity of needs, and not just the summation of individual didactic solutions copied from special schools. This assigns a special place to pedagogical diagnosis, which involves recognizing the needs of students.

For many years, Polish educational law has had provisions guaranteeing the education of every student (including those with disabilities) in mainstream schools, taking into account their individual needs and developmental capabilities. However, for a dozen years or so, in-depth identification of the needs of the child and the student is dedicated only to those who have an indication of the need for special education. For them alone, schools are required to prepare a Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment (M-SFA) and create individual Educational and Therapeutic Plans (ETP). Such a diagnostic and support standard does not apply to other students who are diagnosed with other disorders not included in the Polish indication for special education (for example, specific learning disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, chronic diseases or ADHD syndrome). This gives rise to inequalities in access to the various scopes of support implemented on school grounds. In the case of a selected group of students with an indication of the need for special education (which can also be provided in a mainstream inclusive school), Polish education law formulates only general guidelines as to what the M-SFA should contain, what its role should be in planning work with the student (it is the basis of the ETP – individual educational and therapeutic program for the student), and how often it should be carried out (at least twice a year). The guidelines for the M-SFA were not accompanied by reference to any specific diagnostic tools, nor was there even an official template for such a document. While several methodological proposals and templates for M-SFA and corresponding ETP documents have emerged in Poland, these have not been standardized and have only been presented as formal frameworks for a loosely defined functional assessment. While this gave some leeway to build on existing tools for teachers, it was a dubious benefit, in the absence of specific models for identifying needs, including specific (sets of) tools consistent with the M-SFA assumptions. This meant that the path from the special education needs certificate to M-SFA and then to ETP was not straightforward. Mainstream schools had real difficulties carrying out their diagnostic tasks in this regard, including involving parents in the func-

tional assessment process (NIK, 2019). The diagnostic competence of teachers in mainstream institutions was considered low (Konieczna and Konieczna, 2010), the diagnoses they made were often seen as superficial, contributing little to their work with the child (Tersa, 2014) and intuitive (Konieczna and Konieczna, 2010). Teachers themselves perceived these assessments as unnecessary and as hindrances (Sadowska and Janiszewska-Nieścioruk, 2018). It is difficult to blame teachers for this state of affairs.

Hence, there arose the need to support teachers in their diagnostic tasks and the necessity for a standardized assessment of the needs of all students requiring support, with unified tools ensuring both universality and flexibility. The Model of Education for All also points to the need to base functional assessment on the ICF – the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (MEN, 2020), as a universal basis for descriptive categories of human functioning. One of the advantages of using ICF is its reliance on the biopsychosocial model of human functioning, which allows for a holistic approach to diagnosis, taking into account the environmental context of an individual's personal situation. These are the expectations of the School for All model.

In recent years, educational diagnostic tools based on the ICF classification have started to emerge. However, the first innovative solution in Poland that comprehensively captures a student's functional profile based on the ICF is the School Functional Assessment model and tool (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2022). The set of assessed areas in school functional assessment is consistent with functional assessment tools and developmental screenings for children from 0 to 6 years old, enabling the identification of preschool children's educational needs and long-term tracking of their development for educational purposes (Piotrowicz et al., 2022). These tools have the added advantage of being available in electronic form (limited for the time being for the purposes of the Intersectoral Support Model project; [www1](http://www1)).

Regardless of the nosological diagnosis (and in cases where it is absent, as not every child's situation requires a clinical diagnosis, or it may not always be available even when it would be useful), school functional assessment allows for the determination of a child's current level of functioning in areas relevant to school activities. It helps identify current developmental and educational tasks, recognizing not only a child's weaknesses but also their strengths, even outside the school environment. school functional assessment is not intended solely for students with disabilities; it serves to identify needs in each of the assessed areas, which include: 1) learning and knowledge application; 2) general tasks and responsibilities; 3) communication; 4) moving, including mobility and manual activity; 5) self-care, self-service, and independence; 6) home life; 7) social relationships and interpersonal connections; 8) schooling – the role of the student; 9) life in the local community (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2022). However, it should be clearly emphasized that school functional assessment, is more than a single tool because it is:

- a planned diagnostic process initiated by the teacher when they see the need for it (assessment is not conducted routinely for every student, but only for those whom the teacher believes require additional support),
- a multi-stage task carried out collectively within the school (including parents' involvement, and for older students, their direct participation); teachers collaborate with other educators and specialists,
- based on an initial assessment (team consultations), a decision is made either to provide support or to deepen the assessment using more extensive observational tools),
- the identified problems in the initial assessment also determine the extent of the use of observational tools (the number and type of areas for deeper assessment – not every area requires in-depth evaluation),
- school assessment does not preclude the possibility of further specialized diagnosis in a counseling center, although it may reduce the number of referrals when schools can effectively plan and achieve positive outcomes with the support they provide. Referring a student to a psychological-pedagogical counseling center with a school functional assessment profile can significantly facilitate the specialized diagnostic process by providing a wealth of coherent and organized information about the student in their daily environment.

The school functional assessment process involves two stages and four tools for teachers:

1. An Initial assessment stage with Team Consultation Form, and Team Consultation Protocol, tools.
2. An in-depth assessment stage, which includes Student Observation Sheet and School Functional Assessment Protocol; Student Observation Sheet comes in four versions tailored to four different age groups (Domagała-Zyśk et al., 2022).

We introduce the concept of functional assessment based on the school functional assessment model to show that it is a new solution that gives the teacher specific tools to work with a student in need of support. However, the very idea and task of functional assessment are not new; they have long existed in our educational system, albeit without standardized solutions and tools. School functional assessment provides this standardization while maintaining flexibility in its use. School functional assessment is designed to simplify the work of inclusive education teachers rather than add to their tasks. Functional assessment is the absolute foundation of inclusive education: it is not a tool for diagnosing disorders – it is a tool to guide the teacher's learning about the student and his needs. At first glance, the Functional (School) Assessment Model may raise concerns because of its complexity or anticipated labor intensity. Like any tool, it also requires preparation and, if introduced for mass use, preparation of teachers on a large scale.



Hence, there may be some apprehension and perception of functional assessment as a new, additional diagnostic task for schools.

At this point, it should be mentioned that in parallel with the Specialist Inclusive Education Support Centers pilot program, an inter-university consortium coordinated by the University of Silesia (the project director is Prof. dr hab. Zenon Gajdzica from the University of Silesia; coordinators are employees of the Academy of Special Pedagogy in Warsaw, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Catholic University of Lublin) undertook the Model of Intersectoral Support project – “an innovation and implementation project in the field of functional assessment involving research and development of model solutions for locally provided intersectoral support for children, students and families, based on ICF-related functional assessment methodology” (www1). The project utilized both school functional assessment (for designing intersectoral support for students included in the project, involving around 8,000 students) and functional assessment and screenings for younger children (for designing similar activities within early development support, including preschool-aged children – around 22,000 children). These were extensive population studies, with the goal of improving tools based on ICF (results coming soon). We mention this project because its implementation was connected to the SIESC project, and some SIESCs (including the one in Łódź) also participated in the aforementioned research. This served as an additional avenue for disseminating knowledge about functional assessment and the school functional assessment model to SIESC teachers and, through them, to the supported institutions.

Since both authors had the opportunity to participate in both the SIESCs and Model of Intersectoral Support (with varying degrees of involvement), this was a unique opportunity to look at the support provided to schools, including in their introduction of the new functional assessment model.

## RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

The pilot program aimed at introducing the first Support Centers for Special Educational Needs into educational practices in Poland concluded in June 2023. The authors conducted an evaluation study at the SIESCs in Łódź to assess the support provided to teachers in mainstream educational institutions. The staff at the SIESCs in Łódź had prior experience participating in and coordinating research using functional assessments in the MWM project, which equipped them with the expertise to identify students' needs using the Functional Assessment System. The results of the authors' research have been presented in a separate publication (Jachimczak et al., 2023). The research aim of this article is to showcase selected experiences of project participants related to the introduction of functional assessments.

The authors sought to answer the following question: How did teachers participating in the Specialist Inclusive Education Support Centers pilot project evaluate the implementation of functional assessment in their work?

## RESEARCH METHOD AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The primary research method employed was a Focus Group Interview (FGI) involving teachers and principals from both the supported institutions and the SIESCs. Five such FGIs were conducted in February 2023 (details available in: Jachimczak et al., 2023, pp. 111–112), with between 7 and 11 participants in each group. Four of the focus groups included teachers and specialists from SIESCs, supported kindergartens, elementary schools, and secondary schools, while the fifth group consisted of principals from all participating institutions. It should be noted that this study was not exclusively centered on the issue of functional assessment. Consequently, the results presented in this study are statements selected from the acquired data, focusing on the experiences related to functional assessment in schools. Additionally, the study results are complemented by insights gathered from SIESCs project participants during follow-up training sessions and self-study networks on functional assessment and functional mobility scale, which were also conducted by the authors.

## STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The analysis of the focus interviews was carried out using the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) procedure. For the analyses conducted, the authors made sure that the interpretation of the obtained data took place immediately after the focus groups. Such an action is very important in the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data because the memory of the moderators of the focus interviews is very important.

The following stages of qualitative analysis were used: repeated reading of interview transcripts and making notes in the margins; sorting and segregating the collected material; extracting (cf. Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

## RESULTS

### **Functional assessment in the experiences of the research participants – obtained results**

The concept of functional assessment emerged spontaneously in each of the focus groups, indicating that it represented a new and significant experience for the participants. It is also directly associated with the tasks of inclusive education. When



discussing functional assessment, participants referred to both the Functional Assessment System and other methods of its implementation. Differences and broader perspectives on the utilization of the school functional assessment model were primarily noted by teachers from special schools. Teachers of mainstream institutions conveyed their concerns about functional assessment, mainly due to the previous difficulty of the Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment and the related Educational and Therapeutic Plans, but they also emphasized that it ceased to be a problem after receiving support from the SIESCs: "It was a huge taboo for teachers, and thanks to these training activities this counseling and improvement, now no one is afraid anymore". This is important, because most teachers had previously received some kind of training from school councils, teacher training centers, but they often did not fulfill their role "How many trainings, how many meetings; these trainings are not always valuable. Often these are people with good recommendations, and it turns out that these trainings, meetings – well, they don't quite meet our expectations". From the described experiences, it appears that practical actions, such as diagnostic activities, as well as training conducted in direct contact with teachers who use functional assessment in their daily work, and collaborative work on specific cases, seem to be more effective solutions. This enhances the school's ability to independently handle subsequent diagnoses: "[Now] they know how to develop [assessments], yes, thanks to the experts". The model of direct collaboration with teachers from special schools has encouraged educators to openly discuss the difficulties they encounter: "The problem lies in people's minds, in the fact that they are ashamed to admit they don't know or understand something. That's why we have experts, that's why we have specialists, to provide assistance".

During the project's implementation, not only did teachers' attitudes towards the two key diagnostic-planning documents (Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment, Educational and Therapeutic Plans) change, but they began to function in the supported institutions as actual tools for functional identification of students' needs. Teachers themselves became aware that they were previously unable not only to conduct assessments properly but also to utilize the opportunities that they provide. This indirectly led to reluctance in accepting "challenging" students into the school: "Educational and Therapeutic Plans, Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment [...] – everyone approached it with a trepidation. It's better not to have a child with a diagnosis because that's when the problems start". Support based on experience clarified the significance of diagnostic documents throughout the support process: "We already had some sort of multi-specialist assessment in place, there was a scheme, but then this X [name of the SIESC leader] comes along, shows us a different way, and everything falls into place; everything becomes so simple".

In the focus groups, there was a strong emphasis on schools and preschools gaining significant reinforcement in their diagnostic functions. As a result, supported teachers gained confidence in their ability to handle various situations and realized

that, for effective pedagogical actions with students requiring support, there is no absolute necessity for a diagnosis from a specialist center. This does not undermine the importance of specialized diagnosis but highlights the potential for avoiding unnecessary procedures, as symbolized by the statement: “Unnecessary diagnoses for two hours of revalidation may become a thing of the past”. This is, of course, a simplification, as in the Polish system, a diagnosis from a specialist center is required to allocate these hours of intervention (2 hours per week). Nevertheless, it illustrates the disproportionate effort required for diagnostics (including the child and their parents) compared to the support it leads to. Functional assessment, integrated into the school’s context, provides knowledge about the child much more quickly and directly stimulates thinking about support using the school’s own resources. These experiences with functional assessment led teachers to the conclusion: “Support is right here, on-site, within our institution, provided by our own teachers”.

Teachers recognized the advantages of schools conducting such assessments. What surprised them the most was the realization that “the school can identify many things better than the long-awaited counseling center, which is distant from the child and their environment”. In their view, “even parents interact differently with the school compared to their episodic interactions with the counseling center”. The support provided by SIESCs meant constant collaboration and rapid response for them. There is no criticism of counseling centers in this perspective, but rather an understanding of their situation and assigning them a different role in the system: “Overburdened counseling centers focus on their diagnostic and decision-making tasks” – SIESCs support institutions in school-based diagnosis, and this represents an entirely new form of assistance for these institutions.

There is a clear separation between the role and importance of their own functional assessment and specialized diagnosis: “We don’t say that this child has autism, that he has aphasia [...]. Yes, we don’t say that, but we know where to refer, how to direct this conversation [with parents]. And we know how to work with this child, at least in the beginning”.

The theme of empowering teachers through the conducted functional assessment, especially in their interactions with parents, was strongly emphasized, particularly in the statements of preschool teachers. Unfortunately, during the interviews, they complained that they are often treated more as caregivers, replacing the family, rather than professionally trained child development specialists: “We are seen as more like aunts, as parents often refer to us, not to mention being called preschool teachers. But more like aunts, there to take care of [the child]”. It is paradoxical that parents often undervalue their knowledge and the potential of daily child observations, which are the best source of information regarding functional difficulties and potential signs of developmental disorders.

Teachers raised this issue in the context of the need for support in establishing their authority in their relationships with parents, which experts from SIESCs can

provide: “We are – for example, I am – seen as a backup grandma. That’s because children with all their problems are thrown at me [...]. We are here to feed them soup, to catch up on overdue work, to often change diapers. Where do I stand in front of these parents now, suddenly as an expert? I don’t stand a chance. I have a chance as an observer, but not as someone who will try to impart knowledge to them”. In this statement, the role of the expert was emphasized primarily, but further discussion revealed that it is precisely in their interactions with parents that preschool teachers gain an excellent tool for specific discussions about the child’s behavior in different situations. The conducted functional assessment provides them with more specific arguments. Furthermore, having parents fill out the assessment form – which is not only possible but even recommended in this type of diagnosis – allows both viewpoints to be compared, not as a dispute but to clarify difficulties. Moreover, this procedure allows the teacher to gain a better understanding of the child’s situation and assume the role of a competent advisor: “We may not know what syndrome or disease it is, but we know how to approach discussions with parents [...]. Yes, we already know what advice to give, where to direct those poor parents who simply don’t know what to do next [...]. We already have some experience”; “Parents no longer talk to us only about the proverbial »eating« (i.e. what the child eats at preschool)”.

Thus, it is clear from the statements of teachers in the focus groups that the functional assessment greatly strengthens them in their role as pedagogical diagnosticians and equips them with tools to discuss with the parent the difficulties, although also the strengths of the child. The issue of strengths, however, came up primarily at the Center for the Development of Education’s functional assessment training, when participants doing a simulation of the survey and team consultations saw for themselves how the school functional assessment tools enable them to actually see strengths. There is a real basis for this, to see what the strengths might be at all, because according to teachers, it is not so obvious at all. Functional assessment, including school functional assessment, not only facilitates this, but also gives a certain mental blueprint for how to take these strengths into account in designing support.

Teachers make a clear distinction between the role and possibilities of functional assessment and didactic assessment. Perhaps this is why secondary school teachers are somewhat more reticent about how to use this functional assessment in the context of educational outcomes. They are constrained in this by, on the one hand, their lesser experience of “the wave of inclusion came to our schools later”, and on the other hand, functional assessment seemed to be incompletely relevant to the needs of these schools. They were more likely to raise the issue of accountability for external examinations, vocational examinations, high school graduation results, also for ensuring fairness in assessment, which they are not sure about in the case of students who require a reduction in curriculum requirements. This,

however, is another area on which they have yet to gather experience. Certainly, however, functional assessment has been useful in designing various types of adjustments. There is also an interesting observation that shows that in educational practice, functional assessment begins where the explanatory power of a nosological diagnosis ends. This is somewhat expressed in the words of one focus participant: “Well, with the rental of rehabilitation equipment and teaching aids I would include some kind of such an assessment, an evaluation of the degree of disability. Because all these disabilities on paper are treated the same”.

Finally, we will present statements that testify to the generally good reception of functional assessment and the even higher hopes placed in it. Indeed, teachers say:

“I have more confidence in my own decisions now, and I don’t need others for that. Functional assessment can help, although some people may be afraid of it”.

“And I think this is all going in such a cool direction of functional assessment. That, in fact, it’s up to us to deal with these kids of ours”.

“On one hand, I’m a teacher. On the other hand, I’m a parent of a child with a disability. I know the problems parents face. I know the resistance to diagnosis and actions. So for me, it was like a big WOW that something positive can actually happen for us teachers, for parents, and for children. Yes, I have a very positive attitude. A huge hope that these are really good things for everyone”.

Teachers at the SIESCs are also hopeful, as the implemented project has provided them with valuable experiences they want to continue developing in the future: “We will keep working to enhance the competencies of these educators. I’m also counting on functional assessment which we are introducing”.

## DISCUSSION

Functional assessment, a fundamental aspect of inclusive education in mainstream institutions, can indeed provoke a range of emotions and concerns due to the challenges associated with its implementation. Statements from participants confirm that teachers have learned to function “somehow” with Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment. One wonders how tenuous was the real connection between the assessment performed and the actual work, and what consequences this may have had for (un)meeting the educational needs of students requiring more support. This confirmed the studies cited earlier (Konieczna and Konieczna, 2010; Tersa, 2014; Sadowska and Nieścioruk, 2018) and the results of the audit of NIK (2019) regarding the unpreparedness of mainstream institutions for functional assessment and the possibility of performing it in a superficial manner. The establishments supported in the project by the Łódź Specialist Centers for Supporting Inclusive Education also faced similar difficulties. What is significant, however, is

how quickly – compared to earlier attempts to raise the diagnostic competence of these teachers – the SIESCs support changed the assessment of the difficulty and sensibility of this task. We read this as the effectiveness of the new form of support in terms of practical diagnostic skills.

Among the teachers surveyed, there was a high willingness to use functional assessment in the future – especially among female preschool teachers. They are prepared for long-term observation of the child, and functional assessment is a good platform for cooperation with the parent. Its use may even increase their authority in the eyes of parents. Importantly, teachers are convinced of their ability to handle other cases involving children in the future based on the assessment they have learned to conduct. They see the potential of using this assessment to plan their work with the child based on the resources available both within the child and the school.

It is worth noting that the topic of functional assessment emerged spontaneously in the focus group research, so the specific aspects of the diagnostic measures or the tools themselves were not analyzed in more detail, so, it is difficult to talk about the details yet. Therefore, it may require further research to explore the finer details. Nevertheless, the researchers were somewhat surprised by the strong need to discuss this topic and the remarkably positive opinions regarding functional assessment. This positive response can be understood from an educational perspective, as it reflects a teacher's belief in their ability to understand their students and their needs. After all, inclusive education and the functional assessment model are close to the idea of an open, community school, which is well-known in social pedagogy.

Much earlier, Helena Radlińska's research had already pointed to the need to know the child and his environment in a broader context in relation to educational outcomes. The results of her research led to two important conclusions. The first conclusion demonstrated a connection between an educator's keen interest in the child (that is, also a desire to get to know the child) and the improvement of the child's situation. The second conclusion, particularly relevant to the discussion of functional assessment and multi-specialist support, identified personal "engagement of the teachers themselves (not just external experts) in the process of examining the child's developmental factors within their environment" (Kantowicz, 2010, p. 143). This explains why personal involvement in a more comprehensible diagnostic process than before the project led teachers to such positive reflections and a belief in their own effectiveness. It also underscores the significant role of personal diagnosis conducted by teachers themselves, rather than relying solely on external, specialized, advisory diagnoses. The internal functional assessment conducted within the school or institution plays a vital role in understanding and supporting a child's development.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the conducted analyses, several conclusions can be drawn for educational practice implementing the School for All model:

It is worth noting that despite the existence of the concept of a multi-specialist assessment of a student's level of functioning and the obligatory Multi-Specialist Functioning Assessment document in Poland for over a decade, it does not necessarily mean that teachers are prepared to effectively work based on the functional assessment model. Further refinement of teachers' diagnostic skills is necessary.

The research confirms teachers' fears of functional assessment, perceived as a new form of educational diagnosis, but also points to the great need for it due to the inclusive approach in Polish schools.

It is crucial to continue developing and refining the diagnostic skills of teachers in the field of functional assessment and to make use of new tools.

The staff of special schools that play the role of SIESCs, can be helpful in implementing the functional assessment process. The transfer of diagnostic knowledge works exceptionally well in the formula of support of schools by SIESCs and special educators employed in them (unique benefits of the "teacher-teacher" relationship); special educators with extensive experience in such assessment can be excellent mentors, quickly and effectively developing the diagnostic competence of teachers of supported schools.

Enhancing diagnostic competencies should be coupled with the development of teachers' collaboration skills with parents. Utilizing functional assessment can boost teachers' confidence in their interactions with parents and improve the quality of this collaboration. The parent's ability to participate in this assessment further increases their sense of influence over their child's situation.

Teachers in mainstream schools need to be given the opportunity to overcome their fears of functional assessment and to build a scientifically based belief that the functional assessment conducted by themselves is the best way to get to know the student, his needs, and to effectively influence his situation.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

Limitations in the studies conducted are due to their qualitative nature, which does not allow generalization of the results. However, this is not the purpose of qualitative research. In addition, it should be remembered that the schools and kindergartens included in the survey declared their willingness to participate in the pilot and implementation project. Their teachers, as leaders of change, may therefore have a more positive attitude toward inclusive education and a greater conviction that they can effectively support students with diverse educational needs than teachers from other mainstream institutions. However, there is no de-



nying that the new functional assessment model has proven useful in the work of research participants supported by SIESCs. Research into the practical application of functional assessment is worth continuing using quantitative methods.

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www1: <https://mwm.us.edu.pl/>  
www2: <https://www.ore.edu.pl/2022/01/realizowane-granty-2/>

## OCENA FUNKCJONALNA W DOŚWIADCZENIACH NAUCZYCIELI W PROJEKCIE SPECJALISTYCZNYCH CENTRÓW WSPIERAJĄCYCH EDUKACJĘ WŁĄCZAJĄCĄ. DONIESIENIE Z BADAŃ

**Wprowadzenie:** W czerwcu 2023 r. zakończono w Polsce program pilotażowy wdrożenia do praktyki oświatowej pierwszych Specjalistycznych Centrów Wspierających Edukację Włączającą (SCWEW). Autorki podjęły badania ewaluacyjne w SCWEW w Łodzi.

**Cel badań:** ocena wsparcia udzielanego nauczycielom placówek ogólnodostępnych, a celem artykułu ukazanie doświadczeń związanych z prowadzeniem oceny funkcjonalnej w rozpoznawaniu zróżnicowanych potrzeb uczniów.

**Metoda badań:** Zogniskowany wywiad grupowy (*Focus Group Interview*) z nauczycielami dyrektorami oraz analiza treści wypowiedzi uczestników sieci samokształcenia.

**Wyniki:** to ich wybrane wypowiedzi, oceniające na tle różnych obszarów wsparcia, doświadczenia związane z zastosowaniem szkolnej oceny funkcjonalnej.

**Wnioski:** potwierdzają obawy nauczycieli przed oceną funkcjonalną, postrzeganą jak nowa forma diagnozy edukacyjnej, ale także wskazują na duże potrzeby w tym zakresie wynikające z podejścia włączającego w polskiej szkole. Kadra szkół specjalnych pełniących rolę SCWEW, może być pomocna w implementacji procesu oceny funkcjonalnej dla celów inkluzji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja, włączanie, ocena funkcjonalna, wsparcie, diagnoza nauczycielska