



**Asystent ucznia**  
o specjalnych potrzebach  
edukacyjnych

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**Research report on the pilot implementation  
of SENA assistant services carried out  
as part of the project**

**“Assistant for students with special educational needs (SENA) –  
pilot” (contract number UDA-POWR.02.10.00-00-1004/20-04)**

Report prepared as part of the implementation of the project  
*Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study*  
Ministry of Education and Science (project number WND-POWR.02.10.00–00–1004/20)

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Toruń 2023

ISBN 978-83-8180-858-3

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## Introduction

The concept of inclusive education stems from the natural development of human civilisation and is also enshrined in both international and national legal regulations. Among such acts of international law are: The Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup> (ratified by Poland in 1991), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>2</sup> (ratified by the Polish government in 2012), the European Social Charter<sup>3</sup> (ratified by the Republic of Poland in 1997). In addition, there are international documents, recommendations and strategic recommendations of a more substantive status, such as: Europe 2020: A Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth<sup>4</sup> (adopted by the European Council in 2010), 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>5</sup> (adopted by the United Nations in 2015), Position paper of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights of 12 September 2017 on Fighting School Segregation in Europe through Inclusive Education,<sup>6</sup> EU Council Conclusions of 25 February 2017 on Inclusion in Diversity to achieve a High Quality Education For All,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child, O.J. of 23 December 1991.

<sup>2</sup> UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UN, New York 2006; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, O.J. 25 October 2012, item 1169.

<sup>3</sup> European Social Charter drawn up in Turin on 18 October 1961, O.J. 1999, no. 8, item 67.

<sup>4</sup> Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, European Commission, Brussels 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, <http://www.polskapomoc.gov.pl/Agenda,Zrownowazonego,Rozwoju,2030,2370.html>; accessed: 02.07.2023.

<sup>6</sup> Fighting school segregation in Europe through inclusive education, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Conclusions of the Council of the EU of 25 February 2017 on inclusion in diversity to achieve a high quality education for all, Official Journal of the European Union, 2018/C 195/04.

Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching.<sup>8</sup>

The Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 (published on 25.02.2021 in the Official Journal of the Republic of Poland “Monitor Polski” under item 218; Resolution No. 27 of the Council of Ministers of 16 February 2021 on the adoption of the document the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030; entered into force 14 days after its publication) includes Priority III Education, which presents a component of early intervention, inclusive education, preparation for entry into the labour market, development and the provision of forms of communication for students with disabilities in accordance with their needs.<sup>9</sup> The quoted document indicates that: “The key priorities will centre on developing an inclusive education system at all levels of education, increasingly responding to the diverse needs of children and learners based on differing levels of ability, health, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and talents, among others. The objective is to provide shared learning opportunities as close to home as possible, in a way that ensures integral development for all children, progress in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the development of key competencies as well as social inclusion. This will be achieved while upholding the paramount right of the child’s parents to decide on the place and manner of education, taking into account in the process of assessing needs, planning the type of support and evaluating the effectiveness of that support, the voice of each student, those with disabilities included, in a manner appropriate to their age and individual psychological and physical capacity.”<sup>10</sup>

From a formal-legal point of view, issues of inclusive education are also present in educational law. They oblige kindergartens, schools and institutions to individualise the process of education and upbringing for each child/student, to recognise their developmental and educational needs,

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<sup>8</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching, Official Journal of the European Union, 2018/C 195/01.

<sup>9</sup> <https://niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/download/Uchwala-Nr-27-Rady-Ministrow-w-sprawie-przyjecia-Strategii-1614284683.pdf>; accessed: 02.07.2023.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.



and to include the required psychological and pedagogical assistance. In the Law on School Education of 14 December 2016,<sup>11</sup> Article 1 stipulates provisions directly addressing inclusive education.

In reality, however, the voices of representatives of the field of science experienced in pedagogical practice, as well as the observations of the staff of the Ministry of Education and Science, indicate that the aforementioned provisions tend to be implemented in a very fragmentary and selective manner, with no attempts at synthesis in the educational activities undertaken nor a global and flexible view of the needs of children and adolescents. Difficulties in accessing psychological and pedagogical assistance have been articulated, the provision of which is subject to a formal decision of the authority in charge of the kindergarten/school/institution and rarely corresponds to the actual needs of children/students.<sup>12</sup> These highlighted challenges are further complicated by the dispersion of regulations between different ministries dealing with children, adolescents and adult learners. There are noticeable regional trends in terms of interpreting existing legislation.<sup>13</sup> One can find different approaches to the same regulations by kindergarten/school authorities, principals, and educational supervisory authorities. This leads to the situation where a child/student with identical developmental disorders may receive a different range of support depending on their place of residence. In addition, there is a dispersion of activities carried out by psychological-educational counselling centres, kindergartens, schools and specialised institutions. In consequence, there is a lack of responsibility for diagnostic activities, organisation and implementation of assistance to a child in need of developmental and educational support. There is a phenomenon of shifting responsibility between different institutions. This causes the field of support to be limited and its quality and efficiency to be underestim-

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<sup>11</sup> Act on Educational Law, Journal of Laws 2018, item 996, as amended, pp. 1–3.

<sup>12</sup> Supreme Audit Office Report 2016 Prevention of mental disorders in children and adolescents <https://www.nik.gov.pl/aktualnosci/nik-o-pomocy-psychologiczno-pedagogicznej-dla-uczniow.html>; accessed: 02.07.2023.

<sup>13</sup> International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Volume 8. Implementing Inclusive Education: Issues in Bridging the Policy-Practice Gap, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2016.

ed. There is no coherent model of psychological-educational support, which hinders the provision of quality education to children/students of different educational needs.

The trends indicated above are backed up by statistical data showing that the number of students in Poland requiring additional support is growing. The percentage of students qualified for special education and students covered by various forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance is increasing. Data from the Educational Information System show that in the school year 2019/2020, there were 162,054 students and 40,120 preschool children registered for special education due to disabilities. Three groups predominate among students with disabilities: those with mild intellectual disabilities (41,625; 25.7%), those with multiple disabilities (34,074; 21%) and autism, including Asperger's syndrome (32,294; 19.9%). This is followed by the group of students with motor disabilities, including aphasia (17,323; 10.7%) and moderate intellectual disabilities (16,235; 10%). Next, there are children with hearing disabilities (8,949 hard of hearing and 1,704 deaf, 10,653 students in total; 6.6%), visual disabilities (7,246 visually impaired and 219 blind, 7,465 students in total; 4.6%) and 2,385 students with severe intellectual disabilities (1.5% of the population of students with disabilities). The data does not include students with profound intellectual disabilities (since they do not receive an evaluation on the need for special education, but only an evaluation on the need for revalidation classes) (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2021, pp. 18–19).

In the school year 2019/2020, students with visual impairment – 67% in mainstream schools, 24% in inclusive schools (9% in special schools), with hearing impairment – 66% in mainstream schools, 25% in inclusive schools (9% in special schools) were the largest representation in the inclusive and integrated education system, followed by students with autism, including Asperger's syndrome – 58% in mainstream schools, 34% in inclusive schools (8% in special schools), with motor disabilities, including aphasia – 54% in mainstream schools, 41% in inclusive schools (5% in special schools) (ibidem, p. 23). In 2016/2017 and 2017/2018, 1,945,199 and 1,843,635 children and young people, respectively, were provided with various forms of assistance at school.

The data reported demonstrate that approximately 30% of students are covered by psychological and pedagogical support. There is no data on the identified needs, the reason why a child/student is covered by a specific form of assistance or the effectiveness of the support provided. The “Inclusive Education in Poland – Opening Balance 2020” report prepared for the Centre for Educational Development by Dorota Podgórska-Jachnik states that in the school year 2018/2019 (EIS data as of 30.09.2019), there were 2072124 children/students covered by psychological assistance (*ibidem*, p. 49).

The predominant forms of psychological and pedagogical assistance provided by schools in the 2019/2020 school year included speech and language classes (14.5%) and didactic-compensatory classes (14.3%). Moreover, (between 10.1% and 13.4%) corrective-compensatory classes, classes related to the choice of education and vocation, classes aimed at developing talent, workshops, counselling, and consultations. Significantly lower was the share of classes developing emotional and social competences (4.9%) and classes developing learning skills (3.2%). Other therapeutic activities were used at a similar level (4.8%). There was little use of forms of support, such as an individualised learning pathway 35 (0.3%) or group therapeutic (0.09%). There was a negligible rate of individualised pathways for compulsory one-year preschool preparation (0.01%) (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2021, p. 52).

The number of children hospitalised due to mental and behavioural disorders is also gradually increasing. The state of mental health of Poles, including children and adolescents, has become the subject of alarming analyses and remedial measures. Apart from health care institutions and psychological-educational counselling centres, school is indicated as an environment that should provide support for students with mental health problems, emotional crises and suicidal situations. However, there is a shortage of specialists (therapists, psychotherapists) and child psychiatrists. Up to 90.3% of the psychological-educational counselling centres surveyed in the 2019/2020 school year expressed the urgent need for psychotherapists and 89.2% for psychiatrists (*ibidem*, pp. 76–77).

Drawing on the information presented so far, it can be concluded that the proposal of inclusive education as an approach that is meant

to provide all children/students with quality education embedded in their personalised needs and abilities is indeed an essential solution to the educational problems of children/students with special educational needs within the mainstream school system. Education is a natural process in which all forms of discrimination are eliminated, and the diversity of all children/students, their individualised personal characteristics, expectations and society's expectations from the education system are respected (UNESCO International Bureau of Education 2008, p. 3) (Domagała-Zyśk, 2018, p. 1).

The goal of inclusive education is to equip students with the competences necessary to create an inclusive society in the future, i.e. a society where people, regardless of the differences existing between them, are equal members of society and their diversity is seen as a valuable resource for social and civilisational development. A systemic, multidimensional, multidirectional, and process-oriented perception of inclusive education requires a focus on the implementation of flexible educational pathways and programme learning settings that allow for developing the potential of each child/student as a legitimate participant in the educational process.<sup>14</sup>

A special educational needs teaching assistant (hereinafter SENA) can/should play a prominent role in ensuring that children and adolescents receive inclusive education as quality education. A SENA must not be regarded as someone who relieves the child/student of his/her own activities. The role of this professional is to gradually prepare the child/student to solve problems as independently as possible and to expand the field of independence from others. Once the SENA has been intensively involved in his/her student's road to independence, any further intervention may become unnecessary (at least as much as it was at the beginning). Moreover, a SENA cannot substitute for a teacher or a support teacher (i.e. a teacher with a qualification in special education, employed to co-organise the educational process

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<sup>14</sup> Model of Education for All. System solutions aimed at providing high quality education, upbringing and care taking into account differentiated developmental and educational needs of children, students and adult learners, Ministry of Education and Science, Warsaw 2020 (typescript).

of students with disabilities) or a specialist teacher (Appendix 10 of the project Special Educational Needs Teacher Assistant – pilot study, 2020).

The work of a SENA requires certain psychosocial and organisational competencies (ibidem):

1. psychosocial competences: resilience in coping with stress and difficult situations; ability to react promptly, ability to make decisions based on sound analysis of the situation, ability to deal with challenging situations; perceptiveness, dividing attention, ability to manage emotions, responsibility; ability to relate to others; ability to observe and listen; empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, openness to learning;
2. organisational competences, e.g. the ability to plan and organise the daily routine, determine the type of activity for the child/student;
3. communication competences: ability to interact with adults, e.g. parents, teachers, specialist teachers (e.g. psychologist, educationalist), other children/students (also a group of children/students), ability to work as a team, adapting communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner.

The tasks of assistants for a child/student with special educational needs (SEN) have been covered in the literature from various perspectives. The following areas of SENA activities are generally identified (ibidem):

1. supporting the child's/student's overall functioning, understood in particular as support at kindergarten/school or in a group/a classroom in carrying out daily activities (e.g. self-service, mobility, communication and – in agreement with the parents – hygiene routines) enabling participation in classes (and other group/preschool or class/school events) and providing opportunities for learning in the preschool/school and establishing interpersonal relationships,
2. cooperation with teachers and specialist teachers, including joint planning of support activities, participation at faculty meetings at the invitation of the principal (in accordance with Article 69(3a) of the Law on Education, Journal of Laws 2019, item 1148, as amended), making and implementing arrangements for anticipating and

suppressing the child's/student's self-aggression and aggressive behaviour directed at peers and adults,

3. specialised – focusing mainly on personal care and selected medical activities,
4. transport-related – refers to transport to and from kindergarten/school to and from classes, other educational activities, additional classes, preschool/school celebrations, etc. (during the implementation of the project, this was an optional task, organised according to the needs of the child/student and the organisational, financial and personnel capacities of the body running the establishment). The implementation of this task should depend on individual circumstances and be carried out whenever the assistant's support is necessary.

The project “Special Educational Needs teaching assistant – pilot study” was implemented with attention paid to SENA's role in inclusive education. The overarching goal of the project was to improve the accessibility of educational services for children/students with special educational needs, including those with disabilities, who experience limitations in independent functioning in kindergarten/school (including in non-public kindergartens/schools). The pilot study activities were designed to verify the assumptions of the assistant's work presented hereinafter for a period of one school year. Based on these activities and the conclusions developed, the following were assumed: development of solutions for launching assistantship services in kindergartens/schools, more precise characterisation of the group of children/students to whom assistantship services should be addressed, development of standards for particular services (including, *inter alia*, development of recommendations for legal solutions and inclusion of the qualification “Assisting a child/student with special educational needs” in the Integrated Qualification System). The planned activities were also intended to make it possible to undertake work aimed at preparing a team of assistants for children/students with SEN and creating mechanisms for financing assistant services.

The initial standards of a SENA's work prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science, which were subject to verification in the course

of the project, defined the issue of employment, the activities carried out by a SENA and the documentation required for its profession. Therefore, the issues of employment were addressed: in public and non-public kindergartens/schools, personal, psycho-physical and organisational requirements for a SENA: good psycho-physical condition, good time organisation, decision-making skills (associated with increased stress levels), performance of tasks resulting from the scope of duties agreed with the kindergarten/school principal. Documenting the work of a SENA: documentation reduced to the bare minimum, focusing on the collection of relevant information on the child's/student's functioning and the activities performed that affect the child's/student's situation, documenting dedicated nursing and medical activities – carried out in accordance with the contents of the delivered training in pre-medical first aid. All paperwork was subject to data protection (taking into account the fact that some of the information contained in the documentation is sensitive in nature), and the rules of procedure prepared by the principal set out the general rules for the flow of information and communication between the director, teachers and specialist teachers. The details of the communication procedures were specified by each kindergarten/school in line with the procedures adopted in the particular establishment.

This report, “Special Educational Needs teaching assistant – pilot study,” prepared by a research team from the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn (Beata Antoszevska, Urszula Bartnikowska, Katarzyna Ćwirynkało, Iwona Myśliwczyk, Marzenna Zaorska, Agnieszka Żyta) in cooperation with Stanisława Byra from the Maria Curie Skłodowska University, presents concrete data and scientific facts resulting from the implementation of the said project, but also includes recommendations concerning the standardisation of work and the status of SENAs in legal regulations, organisational solutions, tasks in the sphere of formal, substantive, personal and psychosocial requirements. It consists of a section demonstrating strictly quantitative data but also qualitative data (obtained during the study of the focus group). The report provides an introductory element and a general overview of the project, an element

with quantitative data, qualitative data and an element of recommendation in relation to the standard of work of SEN teaching assistants, the options and principles of financing the employment of SENAs. It shows the need for such a profession and its value in the system of inclusive education in Poland.



# Chapter 1. Theoretical framework of the project

## 1.1. Origins of the project

Special Educational Needs teaching assistant – pilot study is a project implemented following a competitive procedure of the Ministry of Education (currently the Ministry of Education and Science) under the Priority Axis: II. Effective public policies for the labour market, economy and education, Measure: 2.10 High quality of the education system. Call number: POWR.02.10.00-IP.02-00-001/20. The assumed initial implementation time of the project envisaged the period from 04.05.2020 to 31.12.2021, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with recruitment of the required number of educational authorities, recruitment of SENAs as well as settlement issues, it was extended to the end of December 2023.

The project was implemented by the Educational Foundation ODITK from Gdańsk (Leader), the Cooperation Fund Foundation, the Association “Sztuka włączania” from Łajski, the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. It constituted a response to the identified social problem, i.e. difficulties in providing adequate and required support for some children/students with special educational needs in mainstream institutions (kindergartens/schools).

The main objective of the project was to improve the accessibility of educational services for children/students with special educational needs, including disabilities, through the development of a standard for the provision of assistant services. The standard of providing services by SENAs was to be developed by training and employment of 640 SENAs for a period of

10 months in 320 establishments (schools/kindergartens) with mainstream branches in 16 voivodships.

Based on a telephone survey carried out by Gdańsk-based ODITK Foundation in March 2020 on a group of ten employees of education departments of school leading authorities, ten school principals, four kindergarten principals, ten teachers with experience in working and cooperating with a teacher aide and ten parents of students with special educational needs, it appears that half of the mainstream schools/kindergartens fail to provide adequate conditions for meeting special educational needs. In terms of access to quality SENA services, the following barriers were identified: shortage of qualified SENAs, insufficient competence of teachers/teacher aides in working with SEN children/students, awareness barriers (among staff, leading authorities, parents of SEN students), lack of standards for SENA training and work, lack of required organisational, legal solutions related to SENA work, financial aspects of hiring an assistant.<sup>1</sup>

The intended effect of the project was to reduce the barriers mentioned above by:

1. Developing the following in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science (MEiN), in particular the Centre for the Development of Education (ORE), which is a structural element of MEiN:
  - a) a standard for SEN Assistant services, including: SENA competence profile, SENA working standards, SENA tasks and how they are carried out in preschool/school (e.g. how, when, where and for what purpose the tasks are carried out), SENA work preparation, rules for a SENA's cooperation with other preschool/school staff outside classes/activities and with teachers during preschool/school activities, rules for financing and employing a SENA, the way children/students qualify for SENA support,
  - b) recommendations for changes in legislation regarding the role and tasks of a SENA,

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<sup>1</sup> The ODITK Foundation application to MEN – Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study, Warsaw 2020.

- c) contribution to the description of the qualification related to assisting a child/student with SEN, enabling an entry in the Integrated Qualifications Register (IQR) – in cooperation with the Educational Research Institute – IBE (a subordinate unit of MEiN),
2. Launching a learning platform to collect knowledge about SENA.
3. Increasing the level of accessibility to education for 640 children/students with SEN in schools of various types (state, private) through 144 grants awarded to various types of preschool/school authorities for the employment of SENAs (on average 2.2 schools per grantee, maximum two SENAs per school, 640 SENAs in total), training of 4,800 preschool/school teaching staff in inclusive education involving SENAs.

Project implementation should contribute to increasing the availability of SENA services during and after the project, increasing their quality, which means better access to educational services for children/students with SEN. Project activities match the assumptions and contribute to the achievement of the objectives of Axis II of POWER, including the specific objective: Improving accessibility of educational services for learners with special needs, including those with disabilities, the provisions of the government's Accessibility Plus programme, which in the area of education seeks to increase inventiveness, purchase equipment and organise educational facilities better, provide them with equipment for teaching blind and deaf children, for instance, improve marking of corridors, educate teachers and future professionals and make schools a friendly place for all. Furthermore, the provisions of the Strategy for Responsible Development (Specific Objective II Socially sensitive and territorially sustainable development, the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (to which Poland is a signatory).

Over the course of the project, a SENA was recommended to assist children/students with SEN who:

- a) exhibit difficulties in independent functioning in the institution – school/preschool (in terms of mobility, hygiene, organisation of learning), in communication, resulting from low social competences;
- b) display aggressive and/or self-harming behaviour;

- c) display behaviour that is disruptive to other children/students in the preschool/school (intrusive, uncontrolled shouting, other undesirable behaviour, etc.).

Persons employed as SENAs in the project had to meet the following conditions: holding a general or vocational secondary education diploma, a clean criminal record certificate from the National Criminal Register, valid SANEPID medical examinations, being in good health to be able to perform physical activities that heavily strain the musculoskeletal system, communicative competence in Polish. Additionally, they should demonstrate psychosocial competences, such as resilience to stress, responsiveness, communication and organisational competences. A minimum of 10% of the trained SENAs were expected to be parents of children with SEN, their grandparents, or their legal guardians.

The project set out to:

1. award 144 grants to various types of preschool/school authorities,
2. train (“Sztuka włączania” Association from Łajski was responsible for achieving this goal, specifically Marek Tarwacki, the principal of the Łajski Elementary School, together with the school’s staff) and employ 640 SENAs (including 320 women),
3. train 4,800 representatives of the personnel of institutions (kindergartens/schools) (including 3840 women) from a minimum of 320 institutions of different types (mainly schools) running mainstream divisions – again, “Sztuka włączania” Association from Łajski was responsible for this action.

The execution of the project took into account the hypothetical possibility of the presence of different categories of concerns related to its subject matter and the implementation process:

1. Concerns of the authorities running the establishments related to the fact that, after the end of the project, there would be no funding to employ SENAs, but the expectation of assistance on the part of parents and staff of the establishments would remain. Next is the additional cost – the requirement imposed on local authorities to pay SENA’s 13th salary from their own funds after the end of the project. They felt this would cause difficulties in clearing the

project. There were additional concerns that the low salary for SENAs would make it difficult to recruit but also fears about the high intensity of other project activities: multiple training sessions for SENAs and the staff of the establishments, training sessions organised at weekends, which complicates the organisation of the work of the institutions as well as the professional and family life of those attending the training sessions, possible commuting to trainings and study visits.

2. Concerns of some of the staff in the organisations included the potential burden of carrying out the study, completing the research tools, the additional duties associated with monitoring the assistants and reporting and carrying out duties for which there is no remuneration. There are also concerns that a lot of staff training will make it difficult for the establishments to organise their work and that the study will be used to evaluate the work of the establishments themselves and their teachers (“keep an eye on them” and evaluate the kindergarten/school).
3. Teachers’ concerns related to the attitude that SENAs will replace (‘supersede’) special educators from the establishments, that they are cheaper than teachers, and that their employment will generate strife, cause uncooperative behaviour and tensions about such cooperation.
4. Concerns of SENA candidates included the possible high intensity of training while working exhaustively as a SENA, training sessions requiring travel attended at the expense of family life, risk of failing the licensing exam, difficulty in building cooperation with kindergarten/school staff.
5. Awareness concerns – misunderstanding the role of a SENA by some parents and staff (e.g. a SENA relieves children of tasks rather than building their independence), lack of standards for a SENA’s work regarding necessary qualifications, organisation of work, including cooperation with the establishment’s staff, division of tasks between a SENA and support teacher, teacher’s aide, teacher’s assistant, lack of training for a SENA together with the establishment’s staff, lack of support and individual counselling.

The expectations and needs of project participants were also taken into account:

1. Comprehensive support to preschool/school authorities applying for a grant at the stage of developing and submitting applications and to grantees at all stages of carrying out their tasks, arranging meetings/training at convenient times, generally remotely (due to the COVID-19 pandemic – for SENAs, the staff and grantees, keeping documentation to a minimum, ensuring that most documents and examinations can be completed online, support of the grantee in SENA recruitment process, the possibility for SENAs to retake exams, development and sharing of SENA work standards with the grantees, provision of training for both SENAs and school staff, as well as support and individual counselling throughout the grant period, including on-going mentoring, so that SENA's work actually contributes to the development of independence, resilience, social competences of children/students with SEN.
2. Preparation of legal regulations on the role and tasks of SENAs, description of qualifications concerning SENAs to IQR.
3. Recruitment of grantees (GBR) – these could include local self-government units or other legal and natural persons who are the bodies running kindergartens/schools with mainstream classes and are not excluded from receiving grants (pursuant to Article 207(4) of the Public Finance Act of 27 August 2009). Initially, the grantors (the Cooperation Fund Foundation and the ODITK Foundation) made a stipulation in the competition regulations and in the agreements signed with the grantees that each grantee could obtain only one grant within the competition, but this situation was later changed, and the number of grants could be higher. The grant was awarded exclusively for the employment of SENAs in: kindergartens, primary schools, stage I sectoral vocational schools, secondary schools, and vocational schools. SENA had to be employed for a period of 10 months, at a minimum of 0.5 FTE, and the recruitment of SENAs took into account the criteria set out in the work standard and competency profile. SENAs received training before being allowed

to work – basic mandatory training (confirmation of having received the training and passing the exam on this element of the training).

4. The grantees received funding for the SENA's salary. The grant amount was calculated according to the formula: 10 months x the number of SENAs employed x the SENA's monthly salary (calculated as the quotient of the FTE for which the SENA is to be employed and the lowest gross national salary, possibly with a seniority bonus).

In order to ensure a representative group of each type of educational authority, a maximum pool (which was later revised due to difficulties in recruiting grantees and SENA) was specified in the grantee selection procedure for each type of grantee, authorities running educational institutions:

- a) representatives from each of the 16 voivodships/provinces,
- b) representation of each type of managing authority, i.e. urban county with county rights, municipality, urban-rural commune, rural commune, and other legal and natural persons. The pools of funds for each type of managing authority are limited as follows: a minimum of 96 SENAs will be employed in each of the five types of institutions, and a minimum of 4 SENAs will be employed in each type of institution. A maximum of 96 kindergartens will receive grant support, and a minimum of 64 SENAs will be employed in private schools (for a total of 640 SENAs employed in the project in a minimum of 320 establishments).

The grantees received support in recruiting SENAs in the form of: sharing call announcements on social media, websites of the Partners implementing the project, and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) bringing together parents and children with disabilities.

GBR's selection rules obliged grantees to use in the recruitment and hiring of SENA: evaluation criteria consistent with those set out in the SENA Job Standard and the SENA Competency Profile, competency-based criteria, evaluation free of stereotypes, meeting the minimum standard for compliance with the principle of equality between women and men; rewarding (additional points in the evaluation) the grantee's planning of ways to distribute information about the call in such a form and through such channels as to encourage the participation in the recruitment (additional

points in the evaluation) of persons who are parents, grandparents, legal guardians who are raising/have raised children with disabilities, assuming that these persons will not act as SENAs for their own children (the target is 10% of SENA), men, persons with disabilities who have the capacity to act as a SENA. Taking such measures is conditioned by the fact that men constitute about 20% of teachers in mainstream education, and there are far fewer of them in early childhood education – according to the EIS, only one in one hundred teachers is a man, and in pre-school institutions there are even fewer.). There are also very few people with disabilities working in education. In contrast, parents and caretakers of children with disabilities are natural experts in raising their own children by experience.<sup>2</sup>

Recruitment of school staff for study visits and training was based on the following assumptions:

1. The principal of the establishment (school/preschool) and the school psychologist or educator from each establishment where a SENA was employed were delegated to participate in the study visits;
2. The head of the establishment was recruited to participate in the staff training (according to the guidelines included in the grant competition and then the agreement with the grantee);
3. It was compulsory for all teachers teaching in a group/classroom with a SEN child/student receiving SENA support to participate in the training.

The tasks of the organisations leading the project (they were changed later, with some difficulties, including those of a recruitment nature, especially as regards the assumed number of grantees and SENAs employed) – the Cooperation Fund Foundation (leading organisation, responsible for the substantive and financial side) and the Educational Foundation ODITK from Gdańsk (leading organisation directly executing the project) were defined as follows:

1. Preparation of a minimum of 640 people to work as SENAs (provision of training, supervision, counselling),

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<sup>2</sup> The ODITK Foundation application to MEN – Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study, Warsaw 2020.



2. Awarding grants in an open call to local government units or other legal or natural persons who act as authorities running educational establishments (a minimum of 144 authorities) that have mainstream classes for the employment of a minimum of 640 SENAs for a period of 10 months, at a minimum of 0.5 FTE each in 320 establishments (including 96 SENAs in kindergartens).
3. Carrying out scientific studies over a period of 10 months:
  - a) concerning the SENA and its competence profile, the working standard; the tasks and how they are performed in the kindergarten/school (among other things: how, when, where, and for what purpose the tasks are performed); the preparation for work; the rules of cooperation with the other staff of the institution, outside classes and teachers during educational activities (lessons); the rules of financing and employment,
  - b) on how children/students with SEN are qualified for SENA support. The study also covered: self-evaluation conducted by a SENA and the SEN student, parents, principals, school psychologists, educators and other staff.
4. Developing a standard for a SENA's work in each of the areas mentioned above.
5. Preparing recommendations for changes in the law on the role and tasks of SENA, input to the description of the qualification for assisting a child/student with SEN in order to make an entry in IQR (in cooperation with IBE) and all this in cooperation with MEiN, ORE.
6. Preparing and launching a knowledge portal dedicated to SENAs, where all the materials and guidelines developed within the project will be posted, which will prove useful for the bodies running the institutions, school principals, staff and psychological-educational counselling centres, SENAs, parents of children/students with SEN, other people involved in inclusive education.

## 1.2. Training for teaching assistants and staff

SENA training courses (using the framework training programmes and materials annexed for project applicants, prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science) were divided and delivered according to the following categories:

1. Mandatory training – basic training for a minimum of 640 people, divided into 32 groups, with 20 people in each group, 48 hours per group, eight modules per group and three weekend conventions – 16h per group. Between the conventions, participants completed assignments to pass the training content. A minimum attendance of 80% was required. A pass mark of at least 60 points out of 100 was a condition for taking the exam. Completion of the mandatory basic training cycle was a condition for a SENA to be allowed to work in a kindergarten/school. A SENA was obliged to participate in compulsory supplementary trainings and in at least one training from areas listed as optional in the competition project regulations. The verification of the SENA's preparation for work – as indicated above – was confirmed by the final test after the completion of the obligatory basic training (failure to pass meant that the SENA could not start work in the position). Prior to being hired, an interview with the SENA was offered (involving, e.g. school/preschool principal, psychologist, special educator) and a conversation between the SENA and the parents/legal guardians of the child/student. In addition, a SENA received support in the form of consultation and counselling.
2. Compulsory follow-up training for a minimum of 640 people, divided into 32 groups, with an average of 20 people per group, 64h per group, five modules, delivered at weekends, 16h per group. Upon conclusion of all training courses, participants completed an online test (via the knowledge portal) to verify the knowledge they had acquired during the training courses.
3. Optional training – the topics of these training sessions were adapted/tailored to the specific needs resulting from working with a specific child/student with SEN, including those with disabilities

(e.g. handling specific equipment), average 32h per person, 32 groups, average 20 people per group, two weekend conventions, 16h each. After each module, participants completed an online test to check their knowledge.

4. Training for the staff of establishments employing a SENA (based on materials prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science). These are mandatory online training sessions covering issues related to a SENA's work. Four modules per establishment have been planned and made available on the knowledge portal (320 establishments, 15 people per establishment on average). The obligatory basic training and the obligatory supplementary training for SENAs may be joined by representatives of the establishments employing the assistant – a maximum of 10 persons per training, with a maximum number of 30 persons per group. It was assumed that 12 out of 32 groups of obligatory basic training and eight out of 32 groups of obligatory supplementary training for a SENA would be attended by representatives from the establishments where the assistant is employed. It was assumed that a maximum of 1,360 staff representatives from the establishments would benefit from such an offer (assuming one person per establishment). Optional training courses for staff were offered to a minimum of 320 people, one person per organisation. Training to prepare the teaching staff took place before the start of a SENA's work.
5. Supervisory/counselling meetings carried out during training sessions (after the end of the 1st and before the start of the second training day) – 32 groups, 20 people per group on average, five meetings of 4h per meeting. The topics of the meetings were related to the training, as agreed upon before the meeting.
6. Additional support for school staff – study visits to Łajski Elementary School (observation of a SENA's work, cooperation between school staff, cooperation with parents, familiarisation with documentation) – 32 groups, 20 persons per group on average, two persons from the school, i.e. principal, educational counsellor or psychologist, 8h, one day.

The following is a breakdown of the subject matter and number of teaching hours for the mandatory basic training module.

- I. LEGAL TRAINING – 4h
  1. Legal regulation of activities carried out by a SENA in kindergarten/school – care and nursing activities – 1h
  2. Legal regulation of the cooperation with parents, teachers and other entities that are involved in emergency situations (Police, Medical Emergency, etc.) – 1h
  3. Legal obligation to provide first aid – 1h
  4. Who can perform basic medical activities for a child with a chronic illness – 1h
- II. CHILD/STUDENT WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN KINDERGARTEN/SCHOOL – CHALLENGES FACED BY SENA – 8h
  1. Key milestones in child development. The developmental norm and the concept of the zone of proximal development– 2h
  2. Characteristics of the child/student with special educational needs – potential difficulties, so-called “secondary” effects of dysfunction, the scope of support – 3h
  3. Organisation of psychological-educational support in the kindergarten and school – basic information – 1h
  4. Principles of a SENA’s cooperation with the child/student taking into account specific educational needs and resources of a student – 1h
  5. Care and development support activities for the child/student with special educational needs implemented by a SENA – 1h
- III. TASKS AND ORGANISATION OF THE WORK OF A SENA IN KINDERGARTEN AND SCHOOL – 4h
  1. SENA tasks implemented in kindergarten and school – 2h
  2. Principles of organisation of SENA work – 2h
- IV. HYGIENE AND CARE ACTIVITIES VERSUS SENA ACTIVITIES IN THE KINDERGARTEN/SCHOOL SETTING – 8h
  1. General principles of care and nursing – 2h
  2. Conditioning of the activities performed according to the type of disability and the conditions of the workplace – 1h

3. Activating a child/student with special educational needs – 1h
  4. Planning and organising hygiene and care activities such as feeding, excretion, body hygiene and mobility of a child/student with special educational needs – 1h
  5. Performing hygiene and care activities such as: feeding, excretion, body hygiene and mobility of a child/student with special educational needs – 3h
- V. SUPPORTING THE ACTIVITY AND PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN/STUDENTS IN DAILY PRESCHOOL/SCHOOL PRACTICE – 4h
1. Supporting children's/students' activity and participation as an element of inclusive education – 1h
  2. Activities to support children/students in everyday preschool/school practice – 3h
- VI. COMMUNICATION IN THE PRESCHOOL/SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT
1. Principles of effective communication in SENA work – 3h
  2. Barriers and difficulties in communication in relation to the preschool and school environment – 2h
  3. Constructive communication workshop for SENAs – 3h
- VII. SENA COOPERATION WITH TEACHERS, PRESCHOOL/SCHOOL SPECIALISTS AND PARENTS
1. School as a space for cooperative learning – 2h
  2. Areas of cooperation between SENA and others involved in the process of supporting the development of a student with SEN – 3h
  3. Effective cooperation in practice – 3h
- VIII. TAKING NOTES (NOTETAKER) AND/OR RECORDING THE CONTENTS OF CLASSES AND LESSONS IN A SIMULTANEOUS MANNER
1. Taking notes and recording class content – functions, basic principles, best practices – 2h
  2. Practical scribe workshop – 2h

Module: Compulsory supplementary training covered the subject matters indicated below and the number of hours planned for their implementation:

- I. PROVISION OF PRE-MEDICAL FIRST AID – 24h
  1. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation + AED for children and adults according to ERC Guidelines 2015 – 4h
  2. First aid in the event of epilepsy, head injuries, or stroke, for people with ventriculoperitoneal shunt, and people with hydrocephalus – 4h
  3. First aid for persons with: diabetes mellitus (in case of insulin pump failure, administration of insulin, glucagon), dehydration, vomiting, fainting – 4h
  4. First aid in case of choking, breathlessness – 2h
  5. First aid in case of trauma and bleeding, haemophilia – 3h
  6. First aid in case of anaphylaxis – 2h
  7. Psychology of first aid, notifying child/student's carers – 2h
  8. Acute conditions in psychiatry– mental illnesses, when to call the ambulance and when not to – 2h
  9. Oxygen therapy – 1h
- II. ELEMENTS OF THE WORK OF A HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL – SELECTED ISSUES IN NURSING ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES OF A MEDICAL NATURE – 16 h
  1. Nutrition – 4h
  2. Excretory activities – 4h
  3. Body hygiene activities – 4h
  4. Activities concerning mobility – 4h
  5. SELF-DEVELOPMENT OF A SENA – 4h
  6. Self-development as a lifelong process – 1h
  7. Planning and implementation of self-development – 3h
- III. COPING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS AT KINDERGARTEN/SCHOOL – 12h
  1. Difficult situations faced by a SENA at work – 3h
  2. Dealing with difficult situations – 7h
  3. Professional ethics in a SENA's work – 2h

IV. SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN THE PROCESS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE (NOTE-TAKING, MIND MAPS, ATTENTION TRAINING, METACOGNITIVE COMPETENCE) – 8h

1. The role of a SENA in shaping motivation at work – 2h
2. Supporting the child/student in the development of cognitive and metacognitive competences to facilitate knowledge acquisition – 2h
3. The range of activities performed by SENA to support the child/student's learning process – 4h

Optional training covered the following topics (resulting from the need for the support provided by SENA in a particular kindergarten/school):

1. Alternative and assistive communication methods (AAC) – support for people with expressive language disorders who require alternative language or language support. 2. Braille techniques in the communication process, Braille equipment. 3. Operation of specialised medical equipment (e.g. insulin pump) – instruction manual, SENA's acceptable liability, liaison with parents/legal guardians. 4. Improving work practices and self-development – resulting from the needs of a given SENA 5. Aggressive and self-injurious behaviour of a child/student – who to turn to, how to deal with it? 6. Withdrawal and disturbed sense of security – working with professionals and teachers in supporting the child/student. A sample timetable of selected topics for the module is indicated below.

I. OPERATION OF SPECIALISED MEDICAL EQUIPMENT – 3h

1. Moving and handling equipment
2. Medical devices to support and control vital functions

II. AGGRESSIVE AND SELF-INJURIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF THE CHILD/STUDENT – WHO TO TURN TO AND HOW TO DEAL WITH IT? – 6h

1. Identifying the sources and causes of aggression – 2h
2. Ways of dealing with children's/students' difficult behaviour – 3h
3. Procedures for dealing with child/student aggression or self-injurious behaviour – 1h

III. SELF-DEVELOPMENT OF A SENA

1. Scope of activity:
  - a) Training focused on care: compulsory supplementary
2. General objectives
  - a) Increased sense of responsibility for self-development
  - b) Acquiring the ability to analyse one's own resources and the way they can be used for a SENA's activities
  - c) Acquiring the skill to plan self-development
3. Specific (operational) objectives. Participant:
  - a) Explains what lifelong learning is
  - b) Explains the concept of self-development
  - c) Points out the benefits of self-development in relation to oneself and the beneficiaries of his/her support
  - d) Applies the strategies learnt for analysing one's own resources in practice (including, among others, SWOT analysis)
  - e) Makes effective use of available resources in the course of self-development
  - f) Draws up an Individual Self-Development Plan
4. List of modules
  - a) Self-development as a lifelong process
  - b) Planning and implementation of self-development
5. Duration of the entire training course and individual modules
  - a) Total – 4h
  - b) Part I – 1h
  - c) Part II – 3h
6. Group size
  - a) 20–30 persons
7. Detailed content:
  - a) Self-development as a lifelong process
    - a1) Lifelong learning
      - > what lifelong learning is
      - > where, how and when to learn
      - > finding resources and using them effectively
      - > personal and professional development as components of self-development



- › areas of a SENA's professional development
  - personal qualities
  - social relations
  - increase in the professionalization of providing nursing care
- a2) The benefits of self-development
  - › for a SENA
    - setting goals and achieving them
    - increase in self-awareness
    - increased motivation
    - updating and expanding knowledge
    - professional development
    - competence building
    - self-management skills
  - › other
    - for the environment, including children/students
    - support tailored to the individual needs of children/students
    - wider range of activities
    - increased safety of supported children/students
    - updated knowledge including optimisation in the field of medicine and care techniques
  - › other
- b) Planning and implementation of self-development
  - b1) Use of resources
    - › own resources
    - › support and advisory networks
  - b2) SWOT analysis – presentation of the principles behind a SWOT analysis of oneself
    - › (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
    - › conducting SWOT analysis by the participants
    - › discussion on the possibilities of using SWOT analysis for planning self-development
  - b3) A SENA's individual self-development plan
    - › principles for drawing up the Individual Self-Development Plan

- › forms of preparing the self-development plan (mind map, e-plan, diagram, description, other)
- › execution of Individual Self-Development Plans by participants
  - Brief summary by the trainer and feedback from participants (e.g. what was important to them in the module and what they consider unnecessary, whether anything surprised them, how they plan to use the knowledge in practice, etc.).
- 8. Guidelines for implementers (including recommended working methods and techniques)
  - a) The module should be preceded by an introduction referring to the planned content, forms of work and training objectives, as well as participants' expectations
  - b) It is advisable to use activating methods in the course of the module. It is recommended that participants work in pairs or groups and interact both with each other and with the trainer
  - c) It is recommended to use case studies (showing self-development paths of model individuals performing tasks similar to SENA), resource mapping, etc.
  - d) Exercises using SWOT analysis and the Individual Self-Development Plan are intended to make participants develop a sense of responsibility for self-development
  - e) All exercises should be summarised, and at the end of the module, participants should additionally be asked for feedback (question round, shooting target, talking wall)
- 9. Educational resources (bibliography and netography for individual modules)
- 10. Literature:
  - a) Becker-Pestka, D., Kołodziej, J., Pujer, K. (2017). *Rozwój osobisty i zawodowy. Wybrane problemy teorii i praktyki*. Wrocław: EXANTE.
  - b) Sokołowska, K., Sylburski, M. (2016). *Przekonania, stereotypy, nawyki. Ich wpływ na nasze życie*. Warsaw: Difin.
  - c) Stawiarska, P. (2016). *Wypalenie zawodowe w perspektywie wyzwań współczesnego świata*. Warsaw: Difin.

- d) <https://hcmdeck.com/blog/indywidualny-plan-rozwoju-pracownika-dlaczego-po-co> (18.01.2020)
- e) <https://kariera.kozminski.edu.pl/bk/show/news/sprawdz-swoja-kariere-przy-pomocy-analzy-swot> (18.01.2020)
- 11. Consulting areas for a SENA, linked to training programmes
  - a) Career counselling, coaching.
  - b) Support areas for SENA work (individual and/or group supervision, mentoring for new SENAs).
  - c) Counselling on the use of SENA support at the regional level (e.g. concerns regarding the medical aspects of care provided, etc.).

## Chapter 2. Quantitative research

### 2.1. Research assumptions

The research component in the project implementation included the following specific tasks:

1. Development of research tools.
2. Carrying out studies during a SENA's work (10 months) concerning:
  - a) the compatibility of the SENA competence profile with the needs (i.e. to what extent the expected SENA competences are sufficient/insufficient to perform the tasks and meet the needs of a SEN child/student), and the selection of the most effective and relevant tools and methods for SENA recruitment,
  - b) the way SENA is prepared to work with the child/student and collaborate within his/her circle (how the substantive scope, timing, forms of activities, etc. meet the needs of SENAs and how they influence his/her preparation for work, what forms of collaboration are ancillary, e.g. supervision, counselling, access to papers on working with a child/student with SEN),
  - c) the way in which the child/student is qualified for SENA support (the criteria and procedure for qualification ensuring the greatest relevance and efficiency), the standards for a SENA's work (the relevance of the solutions adopted in the documentation of a SENA's work,
  - d) procedures for the flow of information and communication with the staff), the effectiveness and usefulness of the tasks undertaken by a SENA (how a SENA's work influences, among other things, the growth of the child's/student's social competence and independence,

- the development of relations with other children/students, the efficiency and comfort of subject teaching from the perspective of the student, the teacher, the parent, the cooperation of the organisation with the parents of SEN students and other students, the adequacy of the adopted rules of a SENA's cooperation with teachers during classes and with other personnel of the organisation outside classes/lessons,
- e) SENA funding opportunities and employment rules (recommendations for legislative changes to enable the employment of a SENA and funding it),
  - f) on-going and final evaluation of SENA's performance.

The study included both self-evaluations carried out by SENA and the SEN child/student (the opinion of the child's parent was essential here), as well as observations by parents, principals, psychologists, school educators, and other staff of the educational institution. They were conducted partly by means of a knowledge portal (portal compliant with the digital standard), where research tools (e.g. survey questionnaires, self-evaluation questionnaires) were included, and in the form of focus group interviews with a SENA, principals/headmasters (possibly vice principals/deputy headmasters), educational counsellors, psychologists, parents of SEN students. Moreover, the results will be developed in the form of a publication report.

In principle, the study was carried out in the normative paradigm (quantitative research). However, due to the focus group interviews, it was also conducted in the interpretative paradigm (qualitative research). The research procedure followed several key stages:

1. Familiarisation with the issue of inclusive education and project documentation (May-December 2020).
2. Suspension of project work due to the COVID-19 pandemic (04.05.2020 to 30.04.2021).
3. Resumption of the project (starting 1 June 2021).
4. Development of survey tools covering several groups of respondents: a SENA, principal/vice principal of the school employing a SENA, class teacher of the child/student under a SENA's care, specialist teachers (psychologist, educational counsellor, other teacher appointed by the principal/vice principal to cooperate in the project,

parent of the child/student with SEN (June 2021 – February 2022). Organising online training for grantees, principals, teachers, and SENAs in the module: scientific study for the project “Special Educational Needs teaching assistant – pilot study” (May-June and September 2022 – 8 trainings).

5. Development of a tool called the monthly report of a SENA’s work with a child/student with SEN (a so-called SENA’s work log) – March 2022.
6. Collaboration with IT specialists to build a research module on the SENA project web platform to integrate the research tools to be filled in by the respondents (launch of the module: a scientific study on the SENA project website with the introduction of all the research tools – February 2022).
7. Development of focus group interview scenarios, recruitment of respondents to participate in a focused study (SENA, principals, parents, teachers, including specialist teachers, children/students with SEN), carrying out focused research (May-April 2022).
8. Monitoring the respondents during the process of filling in the research tools (starting May 2022).
9. The study module will be closed on the project platform in order to analyse and process the research data obtained (end of August 2023).
10. Analysis and description of the focus group study (July – mid-September 2023).
11. Arranging and selecting the details related to the publication of the study report on the SENA project together with the chosen publishing house. Conclusion of the publishing agreement (June-July 2023).
12. Preparation of the project report (May to 15 September 2023).
13. Submission of the report to the publisher (15 September 2023), to be forwarded for review, and therefore, after reviewing and incorporating the reviewer’s comments, publication of the report (250 copies) – publication of the report – early December 2023
14. Submission of the report to a professional translator and subsequent translation into English (by 15 September 2023).

15. Submission of an English translation of the report to the publisher (early October 2023).
16. Publication of the English version of the report (100 copies) – December 2023

The functioning of the research module was designed in such a way that the first questionnaire, the so-called initial survey for the principal, was filled in at the beginning of SENA's work at the facility by the principal/vice principal of the facility employing the assistant and thus, by entering his/her own personal details, the details of SENA and of the student and his/her parent, he/she activated an individual account for the persons indicated, where they received the research tools.

Two questionnaires were prepared for the principal/vice principal: an initial preliminary questionnaire – to be filled in up to one month of SENA's work in the institution, and an evaluation questionnaire – to be filled in the last month of SENA's work in the institution.

Two questionnaires were prepared for the educator/teacher of the child/student with SEN, as well as for the principal/vice principal: the first one, a functioning evaluation sheet for the child/student with SEN, filled in during the first month of SENA's work, and the other one, an evaluation survey to assess the functioning of the child/student with SEN, filled in during the last month of a SENA's work. The sheets for the teacher to observe a child/student with special educational needs in a mainstream kindergarten/school were prepared using the child observation sheet by Jolanta Rafał-Łuniewska. Furthermore, an evaluation questionnaire of the work/collaboration of a SENA/with a SENA was prepared and filled in in the final month of the assistant's employment.

Several tools/questionnaires were prepared for a SENA: a pre-training questionnaire, a post-training questionnaire, an evaluation questionnaire with a self-assessment sheet and a monthly report of a SENA's work with a SEN child/student (the so-called SENA's work log).

The initial questionnaire (to be filled in during the first month of a SENA's work) and the evaluation survey of a SENA's work, together with the evaluation of satisfaction with the assistant's performance (to be filled in during the last month of a SENA's work) were prepared for the parents.

The IT system included the automatic message about the importance of completing the survey sent to the account of those logged in (a so-called 'reminder').

Due to delays related to the completion of the project website and the commencement of the initial mandatory training for assistants, some of the pre-training surveys for a SENA were completed via Google tool (address: [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1jf3\\_IXRCUPhwCewbPo2G-pH\\_68u6l\\_T\\_wxq9zKEnHed0/edit](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1jf3_IXRCUPhwCewbPo2G-pH_68u6l_T_wxq9zKEnHed0/edit). The survey posted on 19 February 2022 by the project's research team).

**The initial questionnaire for the principal/vice principal** included the following:

1. information on the project and on the scientific research carried out as part of the project,
2. personal information sheet including questions about the establishment employing a SENA (school/kindergarten), regarding, *inter alia*, the number of children/students, including children/students with SEN, including children/students with a certificate of disability, including children/students with a certificate of need for special education or early development support (kindergartens), the number of teachers employed, specialist teachers, children assisted by a SENA (number, gender, age, type of SEN, including the child's disability),
3. questions regarding opinion on the SENA candidate (education, health status, clean criminal record, SANEPID examination) – possible answers: 1 – Definitely not, 2 – Rather not, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather yes, 5 – Definitely yes,
4. questions about the opinion on required and desired SENA competences:
  - a) psychosocial competences (resilience to stress and challenging situations, ability to react quickly, ability to make decisions, ability to cope with difficulties, perceptiveness, divided attention, ability to manage emotions, sense of responsibility, ability to relate to others, ability to observe and listen, empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, openness to learning) – possible answers: 1 – Definitely not, 2 – Rather not, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather yes, 5 – Definitely yes;



- b) organisational competences (ability to plan and organise the child's/student's daily routine, ability to decide on the type of activities to be carried out with the child/student, ability to organise the care activities that should be carried out with the child/student, ability to arrange activities to meet the child's/student's medical and health needs) – possible answers: 1 – Definitely not, 2 – Rather not, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather yes, 5 – Definitely yes;
  - c) communicative competences (ability to cooperate with parents of the assisted child/student, ability to cooperate with parents of children/students from the group/class the assisted child/student attends, ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologist, educational counsellors), ability to interact with children/students, ability to work in a team, ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner) – possible answers: 1 – Definitely not, 2 – Rather not, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather yes, 5 – Definitely yes.
5. Questions on the recruitment of a SENA (person(s) reporting the need for employing SENA, possible problems and suggestions for such recruitment).
  6. Questions for feedback on the supervision of a SENA's work (e.g. establishment authorities, parents), evaluation of a SENA's work (frequency, documentation) – possible answers: 1 – Definitely not, 2 – Rather not, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather yes, 5 – Definitely yes.

**Evaluation questionnaire for the principal** included questions: probing satisfaction with a SENA's work – level of satisfaction (Very satisfied, Satisfied, Rather satisfied, Difficult to say, Rather dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Very dissatisfied), descriptive explanation regarding the level of satisfaction with a SENA's work, questions on how children/students were selected/recruited for the assistant's support and how the assistants were recruited (in terms of possible problems and suggestions for solving them), comments on the work of the assistants (both positive and negative aspects), comments on the cooperation of the assistants with the other members of the school staff, comments on the cooperation of the assistants with parents of children/students with special educational needs, possible systemic solutions for employing assistants, general comments on the project.

The questionnaire for the educator/teacher of a child/student with SEN – the SEN Child/Student Functioning Evaluation Sheet (the initial assessment and the evaluation included identical questions; the only difference was that the initial questionnaire was filled in – as indicated above – at the beginning of a SENA’s work, while the evaluation questionnaire was filled in during the final month of a SENA’s work) included the following:

1. information about the project and the scientific study carried out as part of the project,
2. personal information sheet with questions about the email contact with the teacher/educator, with a SENA, concerning the child/student receiving a SENA’s support (group/class, type of SEN, including type of disability, date of observation, information on scoring scale for assessment of skills, abilities acquired by the child/student: 5 pts – very good mastery of a skill or ability, 4 pts – good, 3 pts – sufficient, 2 pts – insufficient, 1 pts – no mastery of a skill or ability),
3. evaluation of the child’s/student’s physical development (tasks marked with an asterisk were not relevant to pre-school children/students) in terms of: gross motor skills (general physical fitness), fine motor skills (hand dexterity), sensory perception,
4. assessment of the child’s/student’s intellectual development (developmental and educational achievements):
  - a) in the area of cognitive processes (visual and auditory perception, attention, memory, thinking),
  - b) in the area of school knowledge and skills (level of mastery of school techniques – concerned school-age children) – reading, writing, calculation,
5. in the area of speech and communication (the assessment included preschool children and schoolchildren),
6. in the area of interests and talents (the assessment referred to both preschool children and schoolchildren),
7. in the area of social-emotional development (the assessment applied to both preschool children and schoolchildren): motivation, controlling emotions and coping with challenging situations, sup-

port from the family, functioning among peers, functioning in the preschool/school environment.

8. assessment of the child's/student's strengths and weaknesses (identification of barriers and limitations to functioning) and possible causes of developmental and educational setbacks.

**An evaluation questionnaire was also prepared for the teacher/educator on the work/collaboration of SENA/with SENA.** The questions related to:

1. SENA's preparedness to work with the child/student (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
2. evaluation of the assistant's help in meeting the child's/student's health needs (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good, Not applicable),
3. assessment of a SENA's support towards meeting the child's/student's health needs (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
4. assessment of a SENA's work in supporting the child/student in commuting, getting around in the establishment, participating in activities, maintaining hygiene, gaining as much independence as possible, in terms of cooperating with the family/legal guardians, cooperating with teachers, specialist teachers, the establishment's administration, participating in diagnosis, in preparing an opinion on the child/student, handling equipment and specialised aids, dealing with challenging situations and problematic behaviour of the child/student, communicating with the child/student, concern for the child's/student's well-being (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good, Not applicable),
5. evaluation of the assistant's cooperation with the child's/student's family regarding communication (communicating progress, difficulties, emerging doubts about the child's/student's functioning) – categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good,

6. evaluation of the assistant's communication with the child's/student's parents (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
7. evaluation of communication with the child's/student's assistant (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
8. a SENA's psychosocial competence assessment (the competences assessed were identical to those in the initial questionnaire for the principal) – categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good with the identification of the most relevant competences,
9. assessment of: a) the assistant's presence in the process of forming the child's/student's relationship with his/her peers in the group/class, b) the assistant's presence in the process of developing the child's/student's social skills, c) the assistant's usefulness (assistance) in working with the child/student (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
10. evaluation related to child's/student's change in functioning under the assistant's care (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good) in: a) the sphere of education, psycho-physical and socio-emotional development (intellectual, physical, socio-emotional development, the area of school knowledge and skills), b) within the peer group, especially in the sphere of relations with peers and the related approach to institutional (preschool/school) obligations, c) the evaluation of the assistant's cooperation with other teachers of the child/student, the achievement of the objective and purpose of the project, i.e. the SENA's preparation for work with the child/student and cooperation with the community, d) own expectations concerning the cooperation with a SENA, e) the assistant's involvement in a SENA's work (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),

11. evaluation of whether the assistant for a child/student with special educational needs has demonstrated the required psycho-social, organisational and communicative competences and of the child's/student's satisfaction with the assistant's presence (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good),
12. own reflections on the assistant's work and cooperation with the assistant.

**The initial questionnaire for the parent of a child/student with SEN** included the following:

1. information about the project and the study being carried out as part of the project,
2. information on the child's age, gender, group/class, type of special educational needs including the nature of the child's disability and the difficulties faced by the child in the establishment,
3. an assessment of the child's development in aspects such as: Hand dexterity, General motor skills (e.g. movement), Pace of learning, Speech, Memory, Ability to focus (concentration of attention), Social development – relationships with adults, Self-care, independence, in the case of students – School skills (reading, writing), School skills (mathematics) – categorisation of answers – 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good,
4. questions about expectations towards a SENA, including but not limited to: supporting the child/student in commuting, getting around in the establishment, participating in activities, maintaining hygiene, gaining as much independence as possible, in terms of cooperating with the family/legal guardians, cooperating with teachers, specialist teachers, the establishment's administration, participating in diagnosis, in preparing an opinion on the child/student, handling equipment and specialised aids, dealing with challenging situations and problematic behaviour of the child/student, communicating with the child/student, concern for the child's/student's well-being (categorisation of

answers: Definitely yes, Rather yes, Difficult to say, Rather no, Definitely no),

5. information about the parent completing the questionnaire and the situation of his/her family: e-mail address, age, parent gender, place of residence of the family, housing and financial situation of the family, children in the family, parents' employment, number of children with disabilities in the family.

**Evaluation questionnaire for the parent of a child/student with SEN** focused essentially on the evaluation of a SENA's work. It covered the following topics:

1. opinion on the improvement of the child's/student's functioning in the following aspects: Hands dexterity, General dexterity (e.g. movement), Pace of learning, Speech, Memory, Ability to concentrate (attention), Social development – relationship with adults, Self-care, independence, in the case of students – School skills (reading, writing), School skills (mathematics) – categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good, 6 – N/A,
2. Opinion on a SENA's performance in assisting the child/student during commuting, in getting around in the establishment, in classes, maintaining hygiene, becoming as independent as possible, in cooperating with the family/legal guardians, cooperating with teachers, specialist teachers, the establishment's administration, participating in diagnosis, in preparing an opinion on the child/student, handling equipment and specialised aids, dealing with challenging situations and difficult behaviour of the child/student, communicating with the child/student, concern for the child's/student's well-being (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good, 6 – N/A),
3. Evaluation of a SENA's performance in assisting the child/student during commuting, in getting around in the establishment, in classes, maintaining hygiene, becoming as independent as possible, in cooperating with the family/legal guardians, cooperating with teachers,

specialist teachers, the establishment's administration, participating in diagnosis, in preparing an opinion on the child/student, handling equipment and specialised aids, dealing with challenging situations and difficult behaviour of the child/student, communicating with the child/student, concern for the child's/student's well-being (categorisation of answers: 1 – Definitely bad, 2 – Rather bad, 3 – I have no opinion, 4 – Rather good, 5 – Definitely good, 6 – N/A),

4. opinion on positive and negative aspects of a SENA's work with the child, systemic solutions in employing a SENA, its core competencies, and the scale of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a SENA's work (categorisation of answers: 1 means very dissatisfied and 5 means very satisfied, about the parent's participation in SENA recruitment, about the project itself.

**Two questionnaires were prepared for SENAs, before the compulsory initial training** and after the training had been delivered. The survey conducted before the obligatory initial training included:

1. information about the project and the scientific study carried out as part of the project,
2. information on a SENA: e-mail address, name and address of the institution where he/she will be employed, gender, age, place of residence, education, profession, years of work experience, experience working with people with disabilities and the circumstances in which this experience was acquired,
3. opinion on the content of the obligatory basic training module: legal aspects, child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges, tasks and organisation of a SENA's work in kindergarten/school, hygiene and care activities vs. provision of care by a SENA in kindergarten/school, supporting children's/students' activity and participation in everyday kindergarten/school practice, a SENA's handling of challenging situations in kindergarten and in school, pre-medical first aid, communication in the preschool/school setting, a SENA's cooperation with kindergarten/school teachers, specialists and parents, tasks and organisation of a SENA's work in kindergarten/school, SENA's

self-development, taking notes (note-taking) and/or recording the content of activities, lessons in a simultaneous way, the way school functions, inclusive education – challenges, supporting the student in the learning process, hygiene and care activities, the work of the health care assistant – nutritional activities, health care assistant’s work – excretion activities, health care assistant’s work – body hygiene activities, health care assistant’s work – mobility activities, general evaluation of the topics of the entire training course (1 – unnecessary, 2 – not very important, 3 – moderately important, 4 – very important, 5 – essential),

4. own comments on the training – what is most useful, what is the preferred form of training (remote, on-site).

**A survey following a SENA’s completion of all training courses** (mandatory, supplementary and optional) included:

1. Evaluation of the content of the training taking into account the following: opinion on the content of the obligatory basic training module: legal aspects, child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges, tasks and organisation of a SENA’s work in kindergarten/school, hygienic and caring activities vs. provision of care by a SENA in kindergarten/school, supporting children’s/students’ activity and participation in everyday kindergarten/school practice, a SENA’s handling of challenging situations in kindergarten and in school, pre-medical first aid, communication in the kindergarten/school environment, a SENA’s cooperation with kindergarten/school teachers, specialists and parents, tasks and organisation of a SENA’s work in kindergarten/school, a SENA’s self-development, taking notes (note-taking) and/or recording the content of activities, lessons in a simultaneous way, the way school functions, inclusive education – challenges, supporting the student in the learning process, hygiene and care activities, the work of the health care assistant – nutritional activities, health care assistant’s work – excretion activities, health care assistant’s work – body hygiene activities, health care assistant’s work – mobility activities, general evaluation of the topics of the entire training course, eval-



uation of the study visit, (1 – unnecessary, 2 – not very important, 3 – moderately important, 4 – very important, 5 – essential),

2. own comments on: methods and forms of class work, the competence of the trainers, the organisation of the classes, the topics that should be included in the training courses and the topics that can be omitted.

**The SENA's self-assessment questionnaire** provided an opinion on the preparation for the field (self-assessment criteria: 1 – none, 2 – poor, 3 – average, 4 – good, 5 – very good) in the following aspects:

1. psychosocial competences (resilience in coping with stress and challenging situations, quick reactions, decision-making skills, coping with difficulties, perceptiveness, divided attention, managing emotions, responsibility, ability to relate to others, observe and listen, to show empathy and sensitivity to the needs of the child/student and those around him/her, openness to learning, 2. organisational competences: ability to plan and organise the child's/student's daily routine, to establish the type of activities, organise care activities, activities connected with meeting the child's/student's health and medical needs, 3. communicational competences (cooperation with the parents of the assisted child/student, cooperation with parents of children/students from the group/class the assisted child/student attends, cooperation with teachers, specialists, ability to work in a team, adapting communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner), 4. preparation to perform work-related tasks (documenting the course of the working day, monitoring and conducting periodical evaluation of one's work), ability to cooperate in an integrated team in order to achieve the objectives of the work with the child/student resulting from his/her functional diagnosis, observation of the child/student in various situations in kindergarten/school, ability to support independence and individuality of the child/student, to help the child/student in transportation, mobility, feeding, hygiene and using the toilet, to prepare for supervision of the child/student's medication and administration of prescribed medication, operation of specialised equipment, to assist the

child/student with homework and participation in care activities, to support the child/student to become as independent as possible in kindergarten/school, to take into account the child's/student's subjectivity, choices and decisions,

2. self-assessment of the child's/student's level of satisfaction with the assistant's support.

**The monthly report of a SENA's work with a child/student with SEN** (the so-called SENA work log) consisted of the following elements:

1. Data to be completed in the first logbook (gender, place of residence, age, education, years of work experience and contact with people with disabilities, profession, type of special educational needs/disabilities of the assisted child/student,
2. Activities performed in relation to the child/student (assistance with mobility and transport, with eating meals, with hygiene and using the toilet (as agreed with the child's/children's parents/legal guardians), support of the child/student during activities to increase the child's/student's involvement and participation, e.g. by motivating the child/student to make an effort, assistance with using educational materials and aids as well as specialised equipment, assistance with taking notes, taking measures to remove barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment to facilitate participation in preschool/school activities, assisting in communication and group participation (where possible), help with homework and participation in care activities, support in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten and school, in solving problems related to the child's/student's daily functioning in educational and care situations, cooperation with the family, teachers and educators and specialists in kindergarten and school, administration and maintenance personnel of the kindergarten/school, a nurse, other persons, as required, including preparation of necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child/student, Participation in meetings aimed at assessing the child/student's level of functioning, with the intention of removing barriers and limitations in the environment, in preparation of an opinion on the

- child's/student's functioning, in the kindergarten and school, in cooperation with teachers, reacting to manifestations of self-aggression and aggression of the child/student as agreed with specialists and teachers, activities connected with supervision of the child/student's intake of medications and administration of long term medications, supervision of the child's/student's use of medical equipment and providing assistance in using permanent medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation), operation of specialised equipment, communication and interaction (e.g. assistive and alternative methods of communication), support for a child/student with behavioural disorders or displaying problematic/risky behaviour (prevention of problem situations, taking care of child/student safety, intervention in case of so-called high-risk situations), support for the process of adaptation of the child/student to the preschool/school environment by, among others providing emotional support and direct help in coping with new situations, assisting the child/student on the way to and from kindergarten/school, supporting the child/student in developing social contacts, using cultural services, recreation, concern for the child's/student's well-being while providing care, including the child's/student's mental health functioning, cooperation with the principal, teachers and specialists, parents, participation in teaching staff meetings,
3. assisting the child/student during: preschool or compulsory education classes, revalidation classes, extra-curricular activities including those developing interests and talents, recesses, excursions, green schools, outdoor educational activities, etc., preschool/school festivities, spending time on the playground,
  4. after five months of work, answer questions about: reflections on the work with the child/student, e.g., the child's/student's achievements, difficulties experienced and successes in the assistant's work, cooperation with the kindergarten/school staff (descriptive answer),
  5. after ten months of work, answer the questions on the same issues as after five months of work plus what could help the assistant in his or her work.

At least several problems, both organisational and beyond the control of the project executors, significantly hampered the performance and timeliness of the study. One of these was the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a temporary suspension of the project and gave rise to further complications. The assumptions were that the assistants would be employed for a period of 10 months, i.e. for the entire school year, i.e. from September to June. When the project was suspended, they had to be employed in different months, including summer vacation, which affected the frequency and the varying time of completing the research tools, including, for example, the work log. Rather than completing the SENA's work log 10 times, those employed in the summer completed the log only eight times, as they were not working directly with the child in kindergarten/school. Similar shifts in the completion of the research tools applied to principals/vice principals of kindergartens/schools, teachers and parents.

Project implementation was further complicated by problems in recruiting both grantees and assistants. Not only was the employment rate of 640 assistants not met, but neither was the assumption of one assistant per centre with one child under their care. Hence, the possible number of assistants employed per establishment had to be increased to two. The criterion for the required employment of SENAs in kindergartens, mainstream elementary schools, sectoral vocational schools, secondary schools and vocational schools was also not met.

Due to COVID-19, the recruitment of grantees and SENAs for training was done late and remotely (with the exception of study visits), and the pre-medical first aid training was practically implemented last. This was due to problems in finding an organisation/institution to provide such training. A significant number of assistants who enrolled for the training and the compulsory basic training either did not attend the training or resigned from the training during its course.

The project website and the tab dedicated to the study were launched late when the SENA part was already underway. This led to a situation where principals/vice principals launched their own account, and thus the assistant, the child and the teacher accounts late, and some failed to do so at all. Some accounts had neither SENA nor any teacher assigned. The

assistant's dates of employment were not entered, which made uploading the research tools problematic. Technical issues related to the functioning of the scientific research tab were present. A number of people reported a problem with data not being saved after completing the survey and receiving a message about needing to retake the survey, even though they had already completed it. They also complained about receiving messages asking for a survey to be completed, even though all surveys had already been completed. Such messages came even after SENA had finished its work.

Over the course of the project, there were cases where the assistant (resignation, sick leave), teacher (sick leave, resignation, maternity leave), and even the principal (one participating institution had a principal performing this role) changed. Some children under SENA care were transferred to special institutions to continue their education. This meant that many accounts lacked the completion of all the research tools.

There were situations where people completing the questionnaires failed to understand the questions. Particularly questions containing specific terminology and those requiring more precise knowledge in the field of inclusive education and concerning disabilities. For example, the question on the number of children/students with a decision on the need for special education and the number of children/students with a certificate of disability was not fully understood. Access to quality broadband internet connections also proved to be a problem.

The single most important issue, however, concerns the ethical dimension and adherence to the required principles of conducting scientific studies. If the requirement for anonymity cannot be met, at least the fulfilment of the criterion of voluntary participation should be paramount. The criterion of voluntary participation as an indicator of the reliability of the research results, which the researchers tried to take into account with the utmost care, meant that the number of completed questionnaires is not the same as the number of participating assistants, principals/vice principals, teachers and parents. Some of the questionnaires were not taken into account due to deficiencies in the survey tools, i.e. questions marked as compulsory were not answered, or the completed tools were not officially uploaded to the project website ("on hold" questionnaires).

## 2.2. Description of the study groups

1. The study involved several groups of people engaged in the preparation and execution of the work of an assistant for a child/student with special educational needs: principals, teachers, parents and the assistants themselves.

### **Principals, teachers/educators surveyed in educational establishments**

The initial assessment questionnaire was completed by 292 principals. The respondents identified 271 students with special educational needs who will benefit from an assistant employed under the project in their kindergarten or school. They also indicated 274 assistants for students with special educational needs who will be employed by the project in the kindergarten or school. Table 1 shows the type of school in which the surveyed principals were employed. More than half of the surveyed principals were employed in an elementary school, and less than a third were in charge of a kindergarten. 3.4% of the respondents worked in a school complex, and the others were employed in a secondary school, a vocational school or another institution not indicated by the respondent.

**Table 1.** Type of establishment employing the surveyed principals

Type of establishment	N	%
Kindergarten	84	28.8
Elementary school	169	57.9
Secondary school	7	2.4
Vocational school	3	1.0
School complex	10	3.4
Other	1	0.3
No data	18	6.2
Total	292	100

Source: own study.

The listed establishments employing the surveyed directors were located in towns of varying sizes. The most common location was a village (126 – 43.2%), 79 (27.1%) respondents worked in a small town (up to 50,000 inhabitants), 50 (17.1%) respondents indicated a city (more than 100,000 inhabitants), and 19 (6.5%) respondents indicated a town (50–100,000 inhabitants), 18 people (6.2%) did not specify any location. The surveyed principals were asked to provide the number of teachers employed in their institution. The reported number of teachers employed varied from 1 to 132. The reported number of teachers co-organising the educational process ranged from 1 to 42, and the number of specialist teachers employed also varied (from 1 to 59). In total, 244 teachers/educators working with a child/student with special educational needs participated in the survey.

#### Parents of children/students with special educational needs

In addition to principals and teachers, the study presented herein also included parents of children subjected to the assistant's services. A total of 344 parents participated in the study, including 236 (68.6%) parents of boys and 108 (31.4%) parents of girls. Women outnumbered men (320 – 93.0%, men: 24–7%). The mean age of the parents surveyed was  $M=37.83$  ( $SD=7.69$ ; for women  $M=37.54$ ,  $SD=7.40$ , for men  $M=41.79$ ,  $SD=10.24$ ). The level of education of the respondent parents is structured as follows:

- › elementary (15 – 4.4%),
- › lower secondary (7 – 2.0%),
- › vocational (61 – 17.7%),
- › secondary (104 – 30.2%),
- › incomplete higher (20 – 5.8%),
- › higher (137 – 39.8%).

The parents under study come predominantly from rural areas (159 – 46.2%), with comparable percentages from small (81 – 23.5%) and big cities (70 – 20.3%), and the remainder from medium-sized towns (34 – 9.9%). Most are married (263 – 76.5%; divorced: 34 – 9.9%; single: 33 – 9.6%; separated: 7–2%; widowed-7(2%)). Almost the same percentage of mothers

are employed (171 – 49.7%) and unemployed (173 – 50.3%). Mothers in full-time employment predominate (127 – 74.27%), with 17 surveyed mothers working part-time (9.94%) and 10 (5.85%) on a contract of mandate. Other forms of employment (17 – 9.94%) included farm work, self-employment. The parents surveyed considered their material situation ( $M=3.45$ ;  $SD=0.81$ ) and housing conditions ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ) to be average. The average size of the respondents' houses/apartments is  $M=96.64$ ;  $SD=88.11$ ). Most parents surveyed live together with their child/children with disabilities (264 – 76.7%).

The parents surveyed have a varied number of children, from 1 to 13, with most having two children (160 – 46.5%). They also have a varied number of children with disabilities (from 1 to 5), with most being a parent of one child with disability (207 – 60.2%). The average age of children/students with disabilities was  $M=8.35$ ,  $SD=3.05$  (age range of children: 2–20 years, two students aged 19 and 20).

### Special educational needs teaching assistants (SENAs)

The next group under study were special educational needs teaching assistants. They were trained prior to carrying out their tasks as assistants, and information was collected from them both before and after the training. There were 476 respondents to the pre-training survey. The majority were women (454 – 95.4%, men: 22 – 4.6%). Most respondents were from rural areas (189 – 39.7%); big cities with over 100,000 inhabitants: 125 – 26.3%; a medium city [20,000–100,000 inhabitants]: 106 – 22.3%; or a small town [up to 20,000 inhabitants]: 56 – 11.8%). The mean age of the respondents was  $M=36.10$ ,  $SD=9.98$ .

Respondents declared the following levels of education:

- > secondary: 162 – 34.0%;
- > post-secondary: 67 – 14.1%;
- > still studying: 39 – 8.2%;
- > higher: 208 – 43.7%.

The average work experience in years was  $M=10.50$ ,  $SD=8.49$ . The average work experience in working with people with disabilities was



$M=4.15$ ,  $SD=5.44$ . In the section devoted to work experience, respondents indicated occupations such as: office worker; day-care worker; teacher's assistant; actor; cultural animator; accounting assistant, SEN assistant; librarian; biotechnologist; chemist; choir conductor; economist; hair-dresser; hospitality technician; swimming instructor; art instructor; cashier-seller; beautician; tailor; accountant; cook; language teacher; kindergarten teacher; tutor; caretaker in a social welfare home; family assistant; childcare worker; childminder, speech therapist; school teacher; medical assistant; kindergarten/elementary school teacher's assistant/student with disabilities; administrative worker; social worker; sales representative; self-employed; psychologist; administrative clerk; sociologist; instructor/educator.

The majority of respondents had sporadic contact with persons with disabilities (205 – 43.1%), 151 (31.7%) respondents reported frequent contact and 92 (19.3%) respondents reported regular contact. Only 28 people (5.9%) reported that they had no contact with a person with a disability.

### 2.3. Results of the study

The data collected using the tools characterised previously among the four study groups were analysed quantitatively. Pursuant to the adopted nature of the measurement, the analysis was carried out on nominal data, using descriptive statistics and tests for the significance of statistical differences.

#### 2.3.1. Recruitment of assistants and the students in need of teaching assistant support

Data relating to the recruitment of assistants and children/students in need of assistance were obtained from principals, teachers and parents. Therefore, they will be presented and analysed in this order.

## Opinion of principals

The principals participating in the initial survey were asked to provide the total number of students, including students with special educational needs. Table 2 contains the student information given by the surveyed principals.

**Table 2.** General information about students, including students with special educational needs, given by surveyed principals

Information on children/students in the kindergarten/school/establishment	N	%
Number of children/students with decisions on the need for special education, including:	266	50,09
– deaf/hard of hearing	190	35,78
– blind/visually impaired	18	3,39
– with motor disability, including aphasia	16	3,01
– with mild/moderate/significant intellectual disabilities	20	3,77
– with autism/incl. Asperger’s syndrome	93	17,51
– with multiple disabilities	25	4,71
Number of children/students with decisions on the need for individual teaching	18	3,39
Number of children/students with opinions from psychological-educational counselling centres	16	3,01
Number of children/students with certifications on the need for individual obligatory one-year pre-school preparation	148	27,87
Number of children/students with problems, developmental disorders requiring additional support, but having no official documentation about the need for assistance	43	8,10
– liczba dzieci/uczniów bez orzeczeń i opinii wymagających pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej	8	1,51
– liczba dzieci/uczniów z problemami, zaburzeniami rozwojowymi wymagających dodatkowego wsparcia, ale nieposiadających żadnej oficjalnej dokumentacji o potrzebie pomocy	126	23,73
Liczba dzieci/uczniów – ogółem	531	100

Source: own study.

Half of the children/students identified by the surveyed principals had a decision on the need for special education/disability certificate, among which the largest group consisted of children with intellectual disabilities (mild, moderate or severe) (17.51%). The smallest number were children with sensory disabilities and multiple disabilities. Almost 28% of children/students presented an opinion from a psychological-educational counselling centre, and almost 24% were identified as experiencing problems, developmental disorders, requiring additional support, but with no official documentation regarding the need for assistance.

To sum up, the principals provided figures indicating 531 children with special educational needs.

Table 3 presents information on students receiving support from an assistant.

**Table 3.** Information on students receiving support from assistants provided by surveyed principals

Information on children/students in the kindergarten/school/establishment applied for the project	N	%	Chłopcy		Dziewczęta	
			N	%	N	%
Total number of children/students qualified for the project, including:	977	100	649	66,43	328	33,57
– with disabilities in general, including:	416	42,58	277	66,57	139	33,43
– deaf/hard of hearing	40	4,09	21	52,5	19	47,5
– blind/visually impaired	27	2,76	10	37,04	17	62,96
– with motor disability, including aphasia	83	8,50	50	60,24	33	39,76
– with mild/moderate/significant intellectual disabilities	69	7,06	47	68,12	22	31,88
– with autism, incl. Asperger's syndrome	124	12,69	107	86,29	17	13,71
– with multiple disabilities	73	7,47	42	57,53	31	42,47
– socially maladjusted	41	4,20	26	63,41	15	36,59
– at risk of social maladjustment	37	3,78	27	72,97	10	27,03
– with behavioural/emotional disorders	103	10,54	84	81,55	19	18,45
– showing special talents	11	1,13	5	45,45	6	54,55

Information on children/students in the kindergarten/school/establishment applied for the project	N	%	Chłopcy		Dziewczęta	
			N	%	N	%
– with specific learning difficulties	67	6,86	48	71,64	19	28,36
– with competence and language deficits	79	8,09	55	69,62	24	30,38
– with chronic illnesses	55	5,63	29	52,73	26	47,27
– from critical or traumatic backgrounds	58	5,94	40	68,97	18	31,03
– from community negligence related to the living situation of the child/student and his/her family, leisure activities and social contacts	41	4,20	23	56,10	18	43,9
– with adjustment difficulties due to cultural differences or to a change in the educational environment, including those related to previous education abroad	22	2,25	10	45,45	12	54,55
– with problems, developmental disorders requiring additional support in groups not listed above	38	3,89	16	42,11	22	57,89
– other, what?	9	0,92	9	100	–	–

Source: own study.

In the group of children/students with disabilities qualified for SENA support, the largest number were children with:

- > autism/Asperger's syndrome,
- > multiple disabilities
- > intellectual disability.

According to the principals, among the other groups of children/students in the assistant's care, most were those with:

- > behavioural/emotional disorders,
- > competence deficits and language impairment.

The lowest numbers were presented by children/students who were blind/visually impaired and with adjustment difficulties due to cultural differences or changes in the educational environment (including previous education abroad).

In the category of other types of special educational needs, single indications concerned the student with FAS, undergoing speech therapy and

alternative communication, with more severe developmental problems, post-adoption, with social communication disorders, with self-acceptance problems, with significant risk of social maladjustment, with early diagnosis of chronic diseases (diabetes, epilepsy).

In the next part of the survey questionnaire, the surveyed principals were asked about the requirements that a candidate for an assistant should meet. An overwhelming majority (97.3%) of the respondents indicated that the candidate for an assistant should have a secondary or secondary vocational education. 99.2% of the principals expressed a preference for the assistant to have a certificate of clean criminal record from the National Court Register, and 99.4% required a valid SANEPID examination. 98.7% were also in favour of the requirement to be in good health to be able to perform physical activities that place a heavy burden on the musculoskeletal system. Almost all principals (99.9%) also indicated a communicative knowledge of the Polish language.

Using the Likert scale, the principals surveyed rated the psychosocial, organisational and communicative competences that a candidate for assistant should have (1-definitely not, 2-rather not, 3-no opinion, 4-rather yes, 5-definitely yes). The results obtained in this respect are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Competences that a candidate for an assistant should have in the opinion of the principals

Competences	M (średnia)	SD (odchylenie standardowe)
Psychosocial competences		
Resistance to stress and challenging situations	4,75	0,71
Ability to react quickly	4,78	0,68
Ability to make decisions	4,63	0,76
Ability to cope with difficulties	4,71	0,72
Perceptiveness	4,70	0,71

Competences	M (średnia)	SD (odchylenie standardowe)
Divided attention	4,65	0,77
Ability to manage emotions	4,82	0,71
Responsibility	4,87	0,72
Ability to relate to others	4,80	0,75
Ability to observe and listen	4,78	0,74
Empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others	4,85	0,70
Openness to learning	4,74	0,72
<b>Organisational competences</b>		
Ability to plan and organise the child's/student's daily routine	4,49	0,89
Ability to determine the type of activity for the child/student	4,41	0,91
Ability to organise the care activities that should be performed with the child/student	4,61	0,82
Ability to organise activities aimed at meeting the health, medical needs of the child/student	4,35	0,88
<b>Communicative competence</b>		
Ability to cooperate with parents of the assisted child/student	4,75	0,76
Ability to cooperate with parents of children/students from the group/class the assisted student attends	4,56	0,88
Ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologist, educational counsellors), students	4,78	0,72
Ability to work in a team	4,71	0,71
Ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner	4,67	0,80

Source: own study.

As indicated by the data in Table 4, the principals surveyed rated psychosocial and communicative competences higher compared to organisational competences – with regard to the requirements for an assistant candidate.

Among the psychosocial competences, the following were attributed the greatest importance:

- › responsibility,
- › empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others,
- › the ability to manage emotions
- › ability to communicate with other people.

These competencies received the highest recognition from the surveyed principals in comparison to all others.

As far as communicative competence is concerned, the highest rating was given to:

- › ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists, children/students,
- › ability to cooperate with parents of the assisted child/student.

The surveyed principals set the lowest requirements for organisational competence, among which the ability to organise the care activities that should be carried out towards the child/student was the most emphasised.

Principals were given the opportunity to indicate other competences that the assistant candidate should be required to have, which were not included in the questionnaire. The following were among the most frequently mentioned:

- › positive attitude,
- › ability to use the latest information technology,
- › punctuality,
- › impeccable manner,
- › availability,
- › openness to suggestions,
- › knowledge of the basics of child development psychology,
- › mental health,
- › creativity,
- › educational qualifications,
- › conscientiousness,
- › mediation skills,
- › patience,
- › cheerful disposition,
- › self-discipline,
- › assertiveness,
- › aptitude for working with people with disabilities,
- › composure.

In the final part of the survey questionnaire, aimed at gathering preliminary information, there were questions related to the recruitment of children/students. The overwhelming majority of principals indicated the following:

- › requests from teachers (184–63%),
- › suggestions from specialists external to the school (counselling centres, psychological-educational counselling centres) 43 (14.7%),
- › requests from parents 23 (7.9%).

The remaining individual submissions are:

- › principal's decision supported by requests from teachers and specialists,
- › joint decision of the principal, class teacher, specialist and parent,
- › opinion of a multi-specialist team headed by the principal,
- › decision of the leading authority,
- › open call,
- › selection of students by instructors/educators and teachers.

72.5% of the principals surveyed said that the current criteria for the qualification of assistants for work set by local self-government units were appropriate. The remainder (27.5%) responded that they had no opinion on this issue. 49.32% of the principals felt that there was no need to introduce other qualification criteria, 45.89% of the respondents had no opinion in this regard, and only 4.79% of the respondents stated that other, additional qualification criteria should be introduced for assistants.

13 respondents proposed the following additional criteria:

- › education in specific fields, e.g. intellectual disabilities,
- › teaching credentials,
- › competence in terms of observing the child's/student's functioning.

When indicating problems related to the recruitment of children/students (17% of indications) for SENA support, the principals surveyed most frequently mentioned the following:

- › too few candidates,
- › vague qualification criteria,
- › parents' unwillingness to provide information about their child,
- › requirement for a certificate of disability,



- › more children/students requiring assistance than the project could accommodate,
- › too short a period of employment of the assistant,
- › reluctance of the child/student or parent to receive special attention,
- › parents' misunderstanding of the role played by the assistants,
- › parents' reluctance to cooperate with the assistant,
- › unwillingness to work for the lowest salary,
- › lack of efficient communication with counselling centres,
- › parents' fear of being stigmatised,
- › the salary for the assistant is too low in relation to the workload.

The following suggestions for improving the recruitment of students were given:

- › ensuring good, dependable cooperation with parents,
- › training for parents regarding the assistant's work,
- › offering a higher salary to the assistant,
- › raising parents' awareness of how their child can be assisted,
- › more time required to observe the child/student before qualifying them for assistance,
- › conducting a job interview with the candidate for the assistant,
- › simplifying the recruitment procedure for the candidates for assistants,
- › conducting a thorough analysis of the decisions given to children/students with regard to their eligibility for SENA support,
- › requirement for the assistant candidate to have an educational background.

In the evaluation questionnaire focused on assessing the entire process of recruiting assistants for children/students, principals were again asked about possible problems related to the selection of students to be assisted. 228 (77.03%) of the respondents indicated that there were no such problems, while the rest indicated the following types of problems:

- › parents' concerns arising from a new and unfamiliar situation for them;
- › bureaucratisation of the recruitment process;
- › failure to formally diagnose the child at the psychological-educational counselling centre;

- › parents' reluctance to provide their child with individual support, seen as a risk of stigmatisation;
- › too many children in need of assistance;
- › a limited number of assistants;
- › the need for prior observation of the child before providing assistance;
- › little involvement and poor awareness of parents;
- › vague recruitment criteria;
- › small number of students in sectoral vocational schools requiring SENA's support;
- › unwillingness and lack of motivation (or little motivation) among parents to work with assistants.

The vast majority of principals surveyed (239 – 80.74%) did not give any suggestions on how to improve the process of recruiting children/students for assistance. The others suggested changes such as:

- › recruiting all children with a decision on the need for special education for support;
- › refraining from giving overly detailed descriptions of the child/student in the application;
- › the necessity to analyse the certificate/decision, the child's opinion from the psychological-educational counselling centre;
- › the need to observe the child beforehand, to carefully review the complete documentation before making a decision, the requirement for a holistic approach to the child's/student's situation;
- › relying on the opinion of the team of specialists and the participation of the principal of the centre;
- › advance information about the possibility of joining the project;
- › better promotion and awareness-raising campaign;
- › possibility to specify the recruitment criteria within the individual establishment;
- › proper presentation of the project principles and opportunities to parents;
- › participation of a team of teachers in the recruitment, etc.

In their assessment of the way the assistants were recruited, the responding principals also referred to potential problems in the process and suggested

certain changes. However, the majority of them neither identified problems (219 – 73.99%) nor made suggestions for improving recruitment (230 – 77.70%). The most common problems mentioned included the following:

- › difficulty in selecting specific candidates for the assistantship;
- › doubts about the qualifications of candidates;
- › inadequate remuneration for assistants;
- › employment of an assistant on a part-time basis;
- › resignation of an assistant after completing training;
- › candidates for assistants often have no educational qualifications;
- › no candidates with a predisposition to work with a SEN student;
- › no candidates with appropriate qualifications;
- › a large number of candidates not familiar with working with a SEN student;
- › too much bureaucracy.

The most frequently suggested changes are:

- › inclusion of the requirement to have an educational/teaching background in recruitment;
- › training before employing an assistant to work with a child/student with SEN;
- › parents' involvement in the selection of an assistant for their child;
- › probationary period before employing an assistant;
- › potential requirement for a candidate assistant to undergo therapeutic training;
- › clearly defined expectations of the candidate, including character traits conducive to quality communication such as: empathy, patience, openness, understanding, etc.;
- › the possibility of replacing the assistant in the course of the project;
- › clarity of information on the assistant's responsibilities and role.

#### Opinion of teachers/class teachers

The next group of respondents who commented on the recruitment of students to the project to be supported by an assistant were teachers. When giving their child's/student's diagnosis based on which he/she was

provided with assistance, the surveyed (class) teachers pointed to various combinations of disabilities and other special educational needs.

The largest number of students had the following SEN:

- › autism spectrum disorder (109);
- › motor disabilities (18);
- › motor disability, aphasia (16);
- › aphasia (12);
- › intellectual disability of mild or severe degree, autism spectrum disorder(11);
- › chronic illness (11)
- › mild or severe intellectual disability (10); partial hearing impairment (10);
- › multiple disabilities (7);
- › autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorders (7);
- › risk of social maladjustment (7);
- › mild intellectual disability, motor disability, aphasia, multiple disabilities (6);
- › mild intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder (6);
- › partial visual impairment (6);
- › mild intellectual disability, motor disability (4);
- › emotional disorders (4)
- › aphasia, competence and language deficits (2);
- › mild or severe intellectual disability, multiple disabilities (4);
- › emotional disorders, specific learning difficulties (3);
- › emotional disorders, community neglect; emotional disorders, experiencing educational difficulties; social maladjustment, emotional disorders (2);
- › autism spectrum disorder, social maladjustment; total visual impairment, motor impairment (2).

Individually, students with the following SEN were identified: aphasia, autism spectrum disorder; aphasia, emotional disorder; aphasia, emotional disorder; aphasia, emotional disorder, competence and language deficits; competence and language deficits; experience of educational difficulties; experience of crisis or traumatic situations; social maladjustment, specific

learning difficulties, chronic illness, experience of educational difficulties, community neglect; social maladjustment; social maladjustment, emotional disorder, community neglect; mild intellectual disability; mild intellectual disability, experience of educational difficulties; mild intellectual disability, social maladjustment, learning disabilities, competence and language deficits, chronic illness; mild intellectual disability, motor disability, aphasia; mild intellectual disability, learning disabilities, experiencing educational difficulties; mild intellectual disability, motor disability, autism spectrum disorder, multiple disabilities; mild intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities; intellectual disability of mild degree, hearing impairment; intellectual disability of mild degree, visual impairment, autism spectrum; intellectual disability of moderate or severe degree, motor disability; intellectual disability of moderate or severe degree, visual and hearing impairment; moderate or severe intellectual disability, social maladjustment, emotional disorders, deficits in competences and language skills, experiencing educational difficulties; motor disability, specific learning disabilities; motor disability, emotional disorders, deficits in competences and language skills; motor disability, social maladjustment; specific learning disabilities, competence and language deficits; specific learning disabilities, competence and language deficits, community neglect; autism spectrum disorder, social maladjustment, specific learning disabilities, experiencing educational difficulties; autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorder, social maladjustment; total hearing impairment; partial hearing impairment, competence and language deficits; partial hearing impairment, aphasia; partial hearing impairment, visual impairment; partial hearing impairment, social maladjustment, emotional disorder, specific learning disabilities; partial visual impairment, chronic illness; partial visual impairment, chronic illness, emotional disorder, experiencing educational difficulties; emotional disorder, competence and language deficits; emotional disorder, experiencing crisis and traumatic situations; social maladjustment risk, experiencing educational difficulties; social maladjustment risk, specific learning disabilities; social maladjustment risk, emotional disorder, competence and language deficits; community neglect.

### Parents' opinion

On the other hand, interviewed parents reporting on the diagnosis in their child/student that led to the assistant's support indicated the following options (in accordance with the frequency of choices indicated):

- › autism spectrum disorder (autism, Asperger's syndrome): 86;
- › mild intellectual disability: 22;
- › motor disability: 20;
- › motor disability with aphasia: 15;
- › chronic illness (e.g. epilepsy, bronchial asthma, diabetes): 12;
- › risk of social maladjustment, emotional disorders: 10;
- › aphasia: 10;
- › emotional disorders: 10;
- › multiple disabilities: 8;
- › competence deficits and language impairment: 7;
- › experience of educational difficulties: 7;
- › autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorders: 7;
- › partial hearing impairment: 6.

Individual indications included the following combinations: aphasia, autism spectrum disorder; aphasia, adaptive difficulties; experiencing crisis or traumatic situations; social maladjustment; social maladjustment, experiencing crisis situations; social maladjustment, emotional disorders; social maladjustment, emotional disorders, environmental neglect; social maladjustment, emotional disorders, specific learning difficulties, experiencing educational difficulties; mild intellectual disability, social maladjustment; mild intellectual disability, motor disability; mild intellectual disability, motor disability, specific learning difficulties, chronic illness; mild intellectual disability, motor disability, competence deficits and language impairment; mild intellectual disability, specific learning difficulties; mild intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorder, community neglect; mild intellectual disability, partial hearing impairment; mild intellectual disability, partial visual impairment, chronic illness; mild intellectual disability, partial visual impairment, chronic illness, autism spectrum disorder; moderate or

severe intellectual disability; moderate or severe intellectual disability, motor disability; moderate or severe intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder; moderate or severe intellectual disability, partial hearing impairment, chronic illness; moderate or severe intellectual disability, emotional disorder; moderate or severe intellectual disability, emotional disorder, chronic illness; moderate or severe intellectual disability, specific learning difficulty, community neglect; motor disability, aphasia, experiencing educational difficulties; motor disability, aphasia, emotional disorder, specific learning difficulties; motor disability, social maladjustment; motor disability, chronic illness; motor disability, autism spectrum disorder, specific learning difficulties; chronic illness, experiencing educational failure, community neglect; specific learning difficulties; specific learning difficulties, competence deficits and language impairment, experiencing educational failure; specific learning difficulties, experiencing educational failure, community neglect; specific learning difficulties, experiencing crisis or traumatic situations; autism spectrum disorder, experiencing crisis or traumatic situations; autism spectrum disorder, social maladjustment, emotional disorders; autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorders, specific learning difficulties; autism spectrum disorder, emotional disorders, adaptive difficulties; autism spectrum disorder, chronic illness; total hearing impairment; total hearing impairment, competence deficits and language impairment; total hearing impairment, social maladjustment; total hearing impairment, social maladjustment, emotional disorders; partial hearing impairment, emotional disorders; partial hearing impairment, social maladjustment risk; total visual impairment, mobility impairment, chronic illness; total visual impairment, competence deficits and language impairment; partial visual impairment, experiencing educational difficulties; partial visual impairment, experiencing specific learning difficulties; emotional disorders, community neglect, experiencing educational difficulties; at risk of social maladjustment, autism spectrum disorder, experiencing educational difficulties; at risk of social maladjustment, emotional disorders, experiencing specific learning difficulties; at risk of social maladjustment, emotional disorders, experiencing crisis or traumatic situations.

Surveyed parents were asked to list difficulties faced by their child at kindergarten/school. The most frequently mentioned include:

- › problems with social interactions, having difficulty accepting being different due to one's disability;
- › rebellious behaviour;
- › problems with attention; difficulty in controlling emotions;
- › not accepting criticism;
- › lack of independence in completing many school tasks;
- › low self-esteem;
- › difficulties with public speaking;
- › lack of assertiveness;
- › lack of motivation to learn, to work in teams; inability to resolve conflicts;
- › failure to integrate into a peer group;
- › difficulty in understanding and following the teacher's instructions;
- › difficulty with verbal communication;
- › lack of rooms in school for calming down and therapeutic interactions;
- › excessive mobility of the child/student;
- › rivalry between students
- › withdrawal, problems with maintaining satisfactory relationships with peers;
- › difficulties in independent reading, writing, assimilating new knowledge, performing various activities in art, music, technical classes;
- › slow pace of work;
- › difficulties in adapting the child/student to the group, rules, norms in the group/class/school;
- › uncontrolled outbursts of aggression;
- › child's/student's lack of independence in getting around, self care etc.

### 2.3.2. Preparing assistants to work with students

Information on the assistant's preparedness to work with students in need of support was obtained from principals and from the assistants themselves (assessing preparedness in the form of training). It was described



and analysed according to the measurement indicators adopted: tasks set for the assistant, supervision of his/her work, and the assistant's training.

### Opinion of the principals

Declarations from the principals surveyed reveal that the tasks for the assistant were most often assigned by a cross-functional team (121 – 41.44%) or the principal (117 – 40.07%), much less often by teachers (35 – 11.99%). The team setting the tasks for the assistant included the following people:

- › principal and teachers who work with the assisted child/student; principal and specialists working with the child/student (i.e. educational counsellor, special educator, psychologist);
- › educational counsellor, psychologist, class teacher, parents;
- › principal, vice principal, educational counsellor, psychologist, teacher;
- › teacher, educational counsellor, head teacher;
- › headmaster in cooperation with specialists and the form teacher;
- › educational counsellor, psychologist, speech therapist, class teacher;
- › special educator, class teacher, psychologist; tutor, specialists, principal;
- › team of teachers, specialists and parents; team of specialists; child's therapist and class teacher; class teacher, principal.

The majority of the principals surveyed (133 – 45.55%) stated that the principal should supervise (oversee, control) the work of the assistant. The remaining respondents pointed to the following options:

- › principal and teacher (32 – 10.96%),
- › principal and instructor/educator (29 – 9.93%),
- › instructor/educator (29 – 9.93%),
- › teacher (28 – 9.59%),
- › specialist (mainly special educational counsellor, 24 – 8.22%).

The directors were further asked how often the assistant's work should be monitored. The following answers were received:

- › daily (52 – 17.81%),
- › weekly (74 – 25.34%),
- › once a month (97 – 33.22%),

- › once every two/three months (15 – 5.14%),
- › once a semester (24 – 8.22%),
- › once a school year (2 – 0.68%).

How often to supervise a SENA (28 – 9.59%):

- › as required,
- › at Principal’s discretion,
- › on an ongoing basis as required,
- › several times a week,
- › no need for such monitoring.

The majority of principals (170 – 58.2%) believe that the assistant’s work should be subject to reporting, 52 (17.8%) are of the opposite opinion and 70 (23.97%) have no opinion on this issue.

According to the principals surveyed, the assistant’s work-related reporting should take place once a month (121 – 41.44%) or once a semester (103 – 35.27%). Fewer respondents indicated once a kindergarten/school year (29 – 9.93%), and 39 (13.36%) suggested a different frequency: day-to-day noting of work in the logbook and reporting once a month, daily completion of the work logbook, there is no need for day-to-day, tedious reporting, unnecessarily involving the assistant, it would be sufficient for the assistant to attend meetings with people supporting the child/student, reporting in accordance with the unit’s arrangements.

Among the forms of reporting mentioned, the following were most favoured by the principals:

- › assistant’s work log (79 – 27.05%),
- › semester report (75 – 25.68%),
- › monthly report (58 – 19.86%),
- › annual report (12 – 4.11%),
- › no reporting needed (39 – 13.36%).

Other options for SENA reporting were also suggested (29 indications, 9.93%):

- › sheet tailored to the process of assisting a particular child/student,
- › noting unusual, exceptional situations, observations in the child’s/student’s functioning,
- › meetings with the principal and the expert team,

- › opinion on the functioning of the child/student,
- › sheet on cooperation with parents, teachers and specialists.

### Opinion of special educational needs teaching assistants

Prior to the scheduled training to prepare them to fulfil the tasks involved in supporting the child/student, the assistants surveyed expressed their expectations regarding the training and its content, using the scale: 1-un-necessary; 2-of low importance; 3-moderately important; 4-very important; 5-necessary. The results obtained are included in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Expectations of surveyed assistants regarding the contents of training

Contents	Necessary		Very important		Moderately important		Of low importance		Unnecessary	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Legal aspects	166	34.9	204	42.9	84	17.6	13	2.7	9	1.9
Child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges for SENA	319	67.0	139	29.2	16	3.4	1	0.2	1	0.2
Tasks and organisation of SENA's work in the kindergarten/school	305	64.1	151	31.7	16	3.4	3	0.6	1	0.2
Hygiene and care activities versus SENA's provision of care in the kindergarten/school setting	209	43.9	199	41.8	49	10.3	14	2.9	5	1.1
Supporting the activity and participation of children/students in daily preschool/school practice	302	63.4	157	33.0	15	3.2	2	0.4	0	0
SENA's handling of challenging situations in the preschool and school setting	275	57.8	160	33.6	33	6.9	4	0.8	4	0.8
Provision of pre-medical first aid	255	53.6	160	33.6	46	9.7	7	1.5	8	1.7
Communication in the preschool/school environment	233	48.9	206	43.3	32	6.7	6	1.1	0	0

Contents	Necessary		Very important		Moderately important		Of low importance		Unnecessary	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
SENA's cooperation with teachers, preschool/school specialists and parents	282	59.2	172	36.1	19	4.0	1	0.2	2	0.4
SENA's self-development	243	51.1	183	38.4	44	9.2	4	0.8	2	0.4
Taking notes and/or recording the contents of classes, lessons in a simultaneous manner	141	29.6	211	44.3	104	21.8	18	3.8	2	0.4
How the school works	128	26.9	221	46.4	95	20.0	25	5.3	7	1.5
Inclusive education – challenges for SENAs	199	41.8	209	43.9	58	12.2	9	1.9	1	0.2
Supporting the student in the learning process	292	61.3	156	32.8	23	4.8	3	0.6	2	0.4
The work of the health care assistant – care and hygiene activities	176	37.0	205	43.1	67	14.1	15	3.2	13	2.7
Health care assistant's work-nutrition activities	125	26.3	192	40.3	102	21.4	27	5.7	30	6.3
Health care assistant's work – excretion activities	110	21.1	193	40.5	98	20.6	39	8.2	36	7.6
Health care assistant's work – hygiene activities	124	26.1	188	39.5	98	20.6	36	7.6	30	6.3
Health care assistant work's – mobility activities	124	26.1	198	41.6	95	20.0	32	6.7	27	5.7
General evaluation of the entire training course	179	37.6	218	45.8	65	13.7	12	2.5	2	0.4

Source: own study.

The results indicate that all the proposed training content was very much in line with the expectations of the respondents. At the same time, the vast majority considered the topics comprising the proposed training module either necessary or very important (a total of 83.4% of indications).

The majority of respondents considered the following topics as essential for training:

- › child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges faced by SENAs;
- › tasks and organisation of a SENA's work in the kindergarten/school;
- › supporting children's/students' activity and participation in daily life; supporting the student in the process of acquiring knowledge;
- › cooperation between SENAs and teachers, preschool/school specialists and parents;
- › SENA's handling of challenging situations in kindergarten and school;
- › pre-medical first aid and SENA's self-development.

The most frequently regarded as unnecessary were the training topics related to the work of a health care assistant.

In addition, the respondents indicated other topics they thought would be useful and should be included in the training programme. The most frequently mentioned include:

- › knowledge about the needs of a child with SEN;
- › knowledge about disabilities and coping with their implications;
- › comprehensive support for the child in various difficult situations;
- › satisfactory communication with a SEN child;
- › specific rules governing the functioning of the assistant;
- › ways of working with a SEN student;
- › legal aspects related to the assistant's work;
- › ways of reacting to unpredictable situations in the everyday school life of a SEN student;
- › practical aspects of the assistant's work;
- › the assistant's cooperation with parents;
- › communication in the preschool/school environment;
- › effective coping with educational problems;
- › methods of working with children displaying aggressive behaviour;
- › working with a child/student with socio-emotional problems.

Respondents overwhelmingly preferred the remote form of training (404 – 84.9%; stationary: 72 (15,1%). The most frequently cited justifications for the expressed opinion were: lack of time to commute; greater possibility to organise one's own time for training; easier adaptation of the rhythm

of the day to the training time; greater schedule flexibility; time-saving; greater possibility to balance family, work and training obligations.

After the training sessions, the assistants filled in a questionnaire providing information on both the educational content offered and the way the training itself was organised and conducted.

A total of 392 people participated in the survey, summarising the training they had attended. They first rated the training content using a scale: 1 – not necessary; 2 – not very important; 3 – moderately important; 4 – very important; 5 – necessary. The results in this respect are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Importance of training content as perceived by respondents upon completion of training

Contents	Necessary		Very important		Moderately important		Not very important		Not necessary	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Legal aspects	173	44,1	163	41,6	45	11,5	9	2,3	2	0,5
Child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges faced by SENAs	238	60,7	139	35,5	12	3,1	2	0,5	2	0,5
Tasks and organisation of SENAs work in the kindergarten/school	232	59,2	142	36,2	15	3,8	2	0,5	1	0,3
Care and hygiene activities vs. the provision of care by SENAs in the preschool/school setting	147	37,5	180	45,9	49	12,5	11	2,8	5	1,3
Supporting children's/students' activity and participation in everyday kindergarten/school practice	225	57,4	153	39,0	12	3,1	1	0,3	1	0,3
SENA's handling of challenging situations in kindergarten and school	231	58,9	134	34,2	21	5,4	5	1,3	1	0,3
Provision of pre-medical first aid	217	55,4	126	32,1	35	8,9	8	2,0	6	1,5
Communication in the pre-school/school setting	193	49,2	177	45,2	17	4,3	3	0,8	2	0,5

Contents	Necessary		Very important		Moderately important		Not very important		Not necessary	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
SENA's cooperation with teachers, kindergarten/school professionals and parents	229	58,4	147	37,5	14	3,6	1	0,3	1	0,3
SENA's self-development	156	39,8	186	47,4	40	10,2	8	2,0	2	0,5
Taking notes and/or recording the content of activities, lessons in a simultaneous way	106	27,0	180	45,9	85	21,7	13	3,3	8	2,0
The way the school functions	106	27,0	191	48,7	71	18,1	17	4,3	7	1,3
Inclusive education – challenges for SENAs	156	39,8	182	46,4	46	11,7	7	1,8	1	0,3
Supporting the student in the learning process	192	49,0	157	40,1	41	10,5	1	0,3	1	0,3
The work of the health care assistant – care and hygiene activities	135	34,4	167	42,6	65	16,6	19	4,8	6	1,5
Health care assistant work – nutritional activities	100	25,5	166	42,3	76	19,4	25	6,4	25	6,4
Health care assistant work – excretion activities	89	22,7	163	41,6	88	22,4	27	6,9	25	6,4
Health care assistant work – body hygiene activities	89	22,7	168	42,9	85	21,7	26	6,6	24	6,1
Health care assistant work – mobility activities	100	25,5	168	42,9	83	21,2	20	5,1	21	5,4
General evaluation of the topics of the entire training course	141	36,0	186	47,4	53	13,5	6	1,5	6	1,5
Study visit	155	39,5	167	42,6	47	12,0	14	3,6	9	2,3

Source: own study.

The results indicate that the surveyed assistants evaluated the training content positively. Most gave a high rating (in the necessary category) to the content they had previously indicated as expected:

- › child/student with special educational needs in kindergarten/school – challenges faced by SENAs;
- › tasks and organisation of SENA's work in kindergarten/school;
- › SENA's handling of challenging situations in kindergarten and school;
- › supporting children's/students' activity and participation in everyday kindergarten/school practice;
- › SENA's cooperation with teachers, kindergarten/school professionals and parents;
- › provision of pre-medical first aid.

At the same time, it should be noted that slightly fewer respondents who deemed these items necessary, marked these training items as necessary.

It is noteworthy that more respondents considered these necessary after the training:

- › legal aspects,
- › issues of the assistant's self-development
- › when compared to the expectations expressed before the training.

Before the training, respondents considered content related to the work of a health care assistant as either of low importance or unnecessary after the training. However, the number of indications in total did not exceed 14%. Slightly less than 40% of the respondents rated the study visit as necessary, and almost 43% as very important.

The surveyed assistants supplemented the data presented above with additional feedback on the training itself, including the way the classes had been conducted. They pointed to the following methods and forms of activities used during classes in the course of the training:

- › group exercises, practical;
- › teamwork;
- › exchange of experience;
- › individualisation of work with a student;
- › expository methods;
- › informative lecture;
- › chat;
- › storytelling;
- › description;



- > problem-based methods;
- > interactive methods;
- > activating methods;
- > discussion;
- > analysis of materials;
- > working with examples;
- > content presentation;
- > brainstorming;
- > dialogue;
- > adapted worksheets, videos;
- > workshop forms;
- > excellent organisation of classes with varied methods and forms of work;
- > well-thought-out sequence of methods used during classes;
- > methods and techniques of conducting classes adequate to the content presented and objectives pursued;
- > classes varied and engagingly conducted.

In the survey, the surveyed assistants emphasised the considerable and varied competences of the instructors. They mentioned, inter alia:

- > reliable, expert knowledge;
- > extensive professional experience;
- > positive attitude and friendliness towards participants;
- > professionalism and dutifulness;
- > presentation of topics in an interesting way; very good preparation for classes;
- > ability to present a wide range of information;
- > answering questions competently;
- > professional assistance in solving problem situations; creativity;
- > coping with stress;
- > openness;
- > patience;
- > interpersonal relationship building skills;
- > perceptiveness;
- > empathy;

- › clear and interesting communication;
- › transfer of practical knowledge based on practical examples;
- › ability to create a pleasant and creative atmosphere in a group;
- › broadly understood social competences;
- › commitment to passing on knowledge and practical tips;
- › tolerance, calm demeanour.

There were individual indications of the weaknesses of the instructors:

- › use of outdated or inadequate terminology (disabled people instead of people with disabilities);
- › evasive answers to questions about how to react in specific situations involving preschool children.

According to the surveyed assistants, it would be useful to add the following items to the training programme:

- › working with a student in a secondary school;
- › characteristic aspects of working in alternative schools;
- › practical tips for working with a student displaying aggressive behaviour, including self-injury, and also on the Autism spectrum;
- › aspects of sexuality of learners with disabilities;
- › setting boundaries in teaching and parenting children/students with special educational needs;
- › ways and forms of cooperation between the assistant and specialists;
- › knowledge of possible additional dysfunctions of children/students with SEN;
- › rules and conditions of the assistant's work.

They did not identify any specific issues that could be omitted during the training. They only suggested that the number of hours devoted to presenting theoretical issues should be reduced and that not having a study visit during the training should be considered.

According to the assistants, the organisation of the classes was also top-quality. The scope and sequence of the activities were well thought out. There was a focus on the successive transfer of knowledge and skills, the complexity of the content was systematically increased, and the activities were implemented according to the agreed timetable.

There was some minor emphasis on the following difficulties:

- › no information or information provided at the last minute;
- › training sessions held at weekends.

### 2.3.3. Competence profile and tasks of a teaching assistant

This section will present data related to the tasks carried out by the child's/student's assistant, as well as what is expected of him/her and what competences he/she possesses to work with a student with special educational needs.

#### Opinion of the principals

Using the Likert scale, the principals surveyed rated the range of tasks that the assistant should carry out: 1 – strongly disagree, 2 – rather disagree, 3 – difficult to say, 4 – rather agree, 5 – strongly agree. The results of the principals' evaluation are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Tasks that should be carried out by the assistant in the view of the principals surveyed

Tasks	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
helping the child/student with getting around and commuting	4,31	1,08
helping the child/student with eating	4,13	0,98
activities connected with hygiene and using the toilet	4,14	0,88
supporting the child/student during classes to increase their activity and participation, e.g. by motivating them to make an effort	4,75	1,12
helping the child/student to make use of learning materials, aids and specialised equipment	4,66	0,95
helping with taking notes	4,12	1,29
helping with the child's/student's day-to-day functioning in learning and educational situations	4,68	1,34
taking action to overcome barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment	4,55	1,13

Tasks	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
helping the child/student to communicate and participate in the group	4,58	0,98
helping the child/student to do their homework and participate in activities during care activities	4,14	0,91
supporting the child/student to become as independent as possible in kindergarten/school	4,79	0,87
support in solving problems related to the everyday functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations	4,68	0,94
cooperation with the family of the child/student	4,73	1,05
cooperation with teachers and specialists in kindergarten/school	4,85	1,06
cooperation with the administration and maintenance staff of the kindergarten/school, the nurse, and other persons working in or functioning on the premises of the kindergarten/school	4,53	1,17
preparation of necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child/student	4,32	1,34
participating in drafting an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in kindergarten/school	4,42	1,04
reacting to manifestations of self-aggression and/or aggression of the child/student	4,78	1,08
concern for the child's/student's well-being in kindergarten/school and outside the institution	4,67	1,19
performing/assisting a child/student in specialised medical procedures related to their disability	4,68	1,32

Source: own study.

The principals indicated that the key tasks carried out by the assistant include the following:

- › cooperation with teachers, educators and specialists,
- › supporting the child/student to become as independent as possible in kindergarten/school,
- › supporting the child/student during classes to increase their activity and participation, e.g. by motivating them to make an effort,
- › cooperation with the family of the child/student.

The lowest-rated tasks were:

- › helping the student to take notes,
- › eat meals,
- › perform hygiene activities.

The evaluation survey for principals included a number of important issues related to the assistant's work. In total, 296 principals took part in this survey.

When asked how satisfied they were with the work of the assistant for a child/student with special educational needs, they predominantly indicated the following:

- › very satisfied (185 – 62.5%),
- › satisfied 79 (26.7%)
- › The results in the other categories were as follows:
- › rather satisfied (24 – 8.1%),
- › dissatisfied (3–1%),
- › difficult to say (4 – 1.4%).

In justifying their responses, respondents cited such arguments as:

- › the assistant is a great/significant support for the child/student with SEN, as well as for the kindergarten/school teachers and parents;
- › the assistant's work contributed to an increase in the quality of the student's functioning in school;
- › the assistant is an essential link in the comprehensive support of the child/student;
- › the assistant adds to the quality of educational work in the classroom; the assistant's work improves the functioning of all students in the classroom, not just the SEN student;
- › the assistant provides support over a long period of time;
- › the assistant forms a closer relationship with the child and his/her parents; improves communication with parents and between parents and teachers;
- › the assistant's support included both lessons and breaks between them;
- › the assistant accompanies the child/student in all situations requiring assistance;

- › in spite of poor pay and a busy workload, the assistant carried out his/her tasks reliably, conscientiously, and responsibly and provided ideas for a variety of strategies to support the child/student;
- › the assistant continually monitors the child's behaviour and progress and as a result is able to respond appropriately in a supportive way to actual perceived needs;
- › the assistant improved the quality of inclusive education in the school not only by providing systematic day-to-day support for the student, but also by supporting the teacher, e.g. in adapting the curriculum to the student's needs;
- › the assistant's work ensured that individualised support became a reality.

The principals surveyed were further asked to formulate comments regarding the assistant's work, the assistant's cooperation with other school personnel and with parents of children/students with special educational needs. For the first category of comments, 39 (13.18%) of the respondents did not indicate any comment. The remainder responded both positively and negatively by giving the following answers:

- › the assistant is extremely helpful in planning the child's/student's daily routine, continuously diagnoses his/her abilities and limitations, suggests supportive strategies, provides the student with a sense of security;
- › responds skilfully to the needs of the child/student;
- › shows commitment to finding effective ways to assist the child/student;
- › the assistant is well prepared after undergoing training;
- › is a permanent trusted companion for the child/student, supporting him/her at every stage of everyday school life;
- › cooperates regularly with others involved in the education and upbringing of the child/student;
- › should support the child/student during the kindergarten/school year, not necessarily during the summer holidays;
- › displays empathetic understanding;
- › true support for the teacher;

- › fostering the ability to initiate and maintain social relationships in a group with a child/student with SEN;
- › preventing exclusion, reinforcing the independence of the SEN child/student; attention to the individual approach to the child;
- › genuinely helping the child, responding adequately to his/her needs;
- › participation in the comprehensive support of the child implemented by the team;
- › reliable fulfilment of assigned tasks;
- › good availability in terms of hours, creativity.

The very few negative aspects of the assistant's job mentioned are: no relevant education or teaching qualifications;

- › short working hours;
- › inadequate aptitude to work with students with disabilities;
- › late information about training;
- › no relevance of the assistant's work in a sectoral vocational school.

212 (71.62%) of the principals surveyed had no comments regarding the issue related to the assistant's cooperation with other kindergarten/school personnel. The rest commented on the following aspects of this cooperation:

- › visible commitment to cooperate with all kindergarten/school staff involved in supporting the child/student;
- › a receptive approach to suggestions from teachers and professionals working with the child;
- › high competence in interacting with other staff;
- › supporting teachers and parents in solving the child's/student's problems;
- › considerable attention to the joint creation of an optimal support environment for the child/student;
- › effective communication and concern for the transfer of information;
- › regular contact with kindergarten/school staff;
- › assistance in various aspects and joint implementation of different stages of the child's/student's education, including the preparation of teaching aids;
- › high involvement of the assistant in kindergarten/school events, availability and openness to new solutions;

- › once the tasks of individual kindergarten/school employees and the assistant were clearly defined at the outset, cooperation was effective.

234 (79.05%) of the principals surveyed made no comments about the assistant's cooperation with the parents of the child/student. The others pointed out the following:

- › establishing appropriate relations with parents based on respect, trust and understanding;
- › nurturing good cooperation with parents, keeping them informed about their child's progress and difficulties, emotional functioning, social functioning, peer relations;
- › positive feedback from parents on the assistant's work;
- › concern for professionalism in contact with parents, at the same time building on cordiality, kindness, empathy;
- › commitment shared with parents towards strengthening the child's/student's motivation, striving for success, overcoming obstacles;
- › systematic exchange of information about the child based on daily observation of his/her functioning;
- › suggesting specific forms of educational interventions to parents;
- › alleviating parents' psychological tension caused by their child's educational and developmental difficulties;
- › high availability to parents' expectations.

As many as 282 (95.3%) principals surveyed were in favour of creating a systemic solution for employing assistants for children/students with special educational needs. When giving arguments to justify their opinions, they accentuated the following aspects:

- › the need for support, especially in very large groups/classes;
- › the presence of an assistant increases the chances for equal educational opportunities for children/students with different needs;
- › creation of conditions for all establishments to benefit from the assistant's support;
- › establishing the assistant as an important link in cooperation with both teaching and non-teaching staff;
- › a competent assistant provides individualised support to the child/student, increasing his/her developmental and educational potential;



- › the assistant's role should be clearly defined and permanently embedded in the kindergarten/school;
- › it is a constructive addition to the existing teaching and educational offer; the employment of an assistant is a response to the considerable shortage of specialists in the kindergarten/school personnel;
- › there is a growing need for an assistant due to the increasing number of children/students requiring assistance;
- › a systemic solution should be provided not only for the employment of the assistant but also for his/her education;
- › the employment of an assistant would be a helpful complement to the actions of the teacher, specialists, and parents.

### Opinion of the teachers

Another group of respondents who evaluated the assistant's work were the teachers. They made this evaluation with regard to different levels of his/her activity and tasks performed. The number of teachers at this stage of the study was 241. The respondents used a 5-point scale (1-definitely bad, 2-rather bad, 3-I have no opinion, 4-rather good, 5-definitely good), and they could also use the evaluation category – not applicable.

The teachers surveyed rated the preparation of the assistant to support the child/student in the kindergarten/school highly ( $M=4.61$ ,  $SD=0.67$ ). When it came to the evaluation of the assistant's support in meeting the child's/student's health needs, a significant number of answers in certain included elements took the form – not applicable. On the other hand, in all of them, a very good rating of the assistant's work in this area of involvement prevailed (dominated by answers that were definitely good or rather good).

Detailed results are as follows:

- a) activities related to the supervision of the child's/student's long-term medication (not applicable: 122 – 50.6%, definitely good – 101 – 41.9%, rather good: 7 – 2.9%, difficult to say: 7 – 2.9%, rather bad: 1 – 0.4%, definitely bad: 3 – 1.2%;
- b) administration of long-term medication to the child/student (not applicable: 122 – 50.6%, definitely good: 103 – 42.7%, rather good: 6 – 2.5%, difficult to say: 5 – 2.1%, rather bad: 2 – 0.8%, definitely bad: 3 – 1.2%);

- c) supervising the child's/student's use of medical equipment (not applicable: 106 – 44.0%, definitely good: 119 – 49.4%, rather good: 8 – 3.3%, difficult to say: 5 – 2.1%, rather bad: 2 – 0.8%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%;
- d) assistance in the use of regularly used medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation), operation of specialised equipment): not applicable: 12 – 5.0%, definitely good: 184 – 76.3%, rather good: 29 – 12.0%, difficult to say: 5 – 2.1%, rather bad: 5 – 2.1%, definitely bad: 6 – 2.5%;
- e) operation of medical equipment used permanently by the child/student: not applicable: 30 – 12.4%; definitely good: 172 – 71.4%, rather good: 26 – 10.8%, difficult to say: 4 – 1.7%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 5 – 2.1%;
- f) performing/assisting the child/student during specialised medical procedures related to the child's disability: not applicable: 86–35.7, definitely good: 125 – 51.9%, rather good: 16 – 6.6%, difficult to say: 3 – 1.2%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 7 – 2.9%.

The next area of evaluation concerned the assistant's activities related to supporting the student in meeting care and educational needs. Again, teachers rated the assistant's work highly in this area ( $M=4.67$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ).

Table 8 shows the detailed results per task/activity considered.

**Table 8.** Surveyed teachers' evaluation of the assistant's work in the area of supporting the special educational needs of the student

Tasks carried out by the assistant	Definitely bad		Rather bad		Difficult to say		Rather good		Definitely good		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
helping the child/student with mobility and commuting	5	2,1	5	2,1	5	2,1	27	11,2	162	67,2	37	15,4
helping the child/student with eating meals	1	0,4	5	2,1	5	2,1	37	15,4	174	72,2	19	7,9

Tasks carried out by the assistant	Definitely bad		Rather bad		Difficult to say		Rather good		Definitely good		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
activities connected with hygiene and using the toilet	4	1,7	1	0,4	9	3,7	24	10,0	152	63,1	51	21,2
supporting the child/student during classes to increase their activity and participation, i.a., by motivating them to make an effort	4	1,7	3	1,2	7	2,9	27	11,2	199	82,6	0	0
helping with the use of learning materials and aids and specialised equipment	7	2,9	7	2,9	6	2,5	22	9,1	193	80,1	6	2,5
assisting with taking notes	9	3,7	2	0,8	7	2,9	17	7,1	201	83,4	5	2,1
assistance related to the daily functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations	8	3,3	2	0,8	7	2,9	21	8,7	202	83,8	0	0
taking action to remove barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment to facilitate participation in kindergarten/school activities	6	2,5	3	1,2	6	2,5	30	12,4	156	64,7	40	16,6
assisting the child/student with communication and participation in the group/class (as far as possible)	9	3,7	3	1,2	5	2,1	30	12,4	177	73,4	17	7,1
assistance with homework and participation in activities during classes	9	3,7	4	1,7	7	2,9	39	16,2	166	68,9	16	6,6
support in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school	4	1,7	4	1,7	5	2,1	31	12,9	196	81,3	0	0

Tasks carried out by the assistant	Definitely bad		Rather bad		Difficult to say		Rather good		Definitely good		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
cooperation with the child's/student's family	10	4,1	1	0,4	5	2,1	29	12,0	195	80,9	0	0
cooperation with teachers and educators and specialists in the kindergarten/school	5	2,1	2	0,8	6	2,5	19	7,9	204	84,6	5	2,1
cooperation with the administration and maintenance personnel of the kindergarten/school, the nurse, other persons working or functioning on the premises	6	2,5	4	1,7	6	2,5	25	10,4	194	80,5	6	2,4
preparing the necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child/student	5	2,1	4	1,7	4	1,7	18	7,5	148	61,4	62	25,7
participation in meetings to assess the child's/student's level of functioning with a view to removing barriers and limitations in the environment	8	3,3	3	1,2	8	3,3	26	10,8	179	74,3	17	7,1
participation in preparing an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in kindergarten/school	2	0,8	0	0	2	0,8	2	0,8	53	22,0	182	75,5
Reacting to child's/student's displays of self-aggression and/or aggressive behaviour	8	3,3	3	1,2	2	0,8	27	11,2	181	75,1	20	8,3
ensuring the well-being of the child/student in the kindergarten/school and outside the establishment	8	3,3	2	0,8	4	1,7	24	10,0	200	83,0	3	1,2

Tasks carried out by the assistant	Definitely bad		Rather bad		Difficult to say		Rather good		Definitely good		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
performing/assisting a child/student with specialised medical procedures related to his/her disability	1	0,4	0	0	0	0	4	1,7	36	14,9	199	82,6
communication and interaction (e.g. assistive and alternative communication methods)	2	0,8	2	0,8	5	2,1	15	6,2	129	53,5	81	33,0
support for a child/student with behavioural disorders or displaying problematic/risky behaviour (prevention of difficult situations, keeping children/students safe, intervention in so-called high-risk situations)	4	1,7	3	1,2	4	1,7	19	7,5	140	58,1	61	25,3
supporting the child's/student's adjustment to the kindergarten/school environment by, inter alia, providing emotional support and direct assistance in coping with new situations	6	2,5	2	0,8	8	3,3	23	9,5	169	70,1	16	6,6
assisting the child/student on the way to and from school	1	0,4	0	0	2	0,8	2	0,8	50	20,7	181	75,1
assisting the child/student in developing social contacts, using cultural services, recreation	6	2,5	2	0,8	2	0,8	25	10,4	170	70,5	21	8,7
concern for the child's/student's well-being while in care, including the child's/student's mental functioning	8	3,3	2	0,8	4	1,7	22	9,1	203	84,2	2	0,8

Source: own study.

Based on the data obtained, the vast majority of teachers surveyed were very positive about the assistant's work in supporting the care and educational needs of children/students.

In three of the tasks assessed, the majority of teachers did not observe the assistant's involvement, stating that these activities did not concern them:

- › participation in preparing an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in kindergarten/school;
- › assisting a child/student with specialised medical procedures related to his/her disability;
- › assisting a child/student on the way to and from kindergarten/school.

In significant numbers, over 80% of respondents attributed the highest rating to the assistant's tasks relating to:

- › cooperation with teachers, educators and specialists;
- › concern for the child's/student's well-being and his/her mental functioning;
- › concern for the child's/student's well-being;
- › assisting the child/student in taking notes and functioning in educational and care situations on a daily basis;
- › supporting the child during activities, motivating him/her to greater participation and effort.

It should be noted here that it was relatively rare (less than 5.5%) for teachers to indicate that the assistant was doing a poor job.

When evaluating the level of the assistant's work related to cooperation with parents, teachers were also very positive. They gave high marks for communication with the child's/student's family, including the provision of information about progress, difficulties, and emerging doubts about the child's/student's functioning (M=4.70; SD=0.66; definitely good: 190 – 78.8%, rather good: 36 – 14.9%, difficult to say: 10 – 4.1%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

Teachers rated the assistant's communication with the parents of the child/student even higher (M=4.78; SD=0.61; definitely good: 207 – 85.9%, rather good: 20 – 8.3%, difficult to say: 9 – 3.7%, rather bad: 5 – 2.1%).

Moreover, the surveyed teachers rated their communication with the assistant highly ( $M=4.71$ ;  $SD=0.80$ , definitely good: 199 – 82.6%, rather good: 27 – 11.2%, difficult to say: 10 – 4.5%, rather bad: 5 – 2.1%).

The opinions of the surveyed teachers on the psychosocial competences of the assistants are included in Table 9.

**Table 9.** Psychosocial competences of the child's/student's assistant in the opinion of the surveyed teachers

Competences	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
resilience to stress and challenging situations	4,64	0,78
ability to react quickly	4,63	0,76
ability to make decisions based on sound analysis of the situation	4,64	0,69
ability to deal with difficulties	4,67	0,67
perceptiveness	4,72	0,68
ability to divide attention	4,71	0,71
ability to manage emotions	4,74	0,74
responsibility; ability to relate to others	4,76	0,76
ability to observe and listen	4,76	0,77
empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others	4,78	0,68
openness to learning	4,78	0,69
ability to plan and organise the child's/student's day	4,66	0,68
ability to identify types of activities for the child/student	4,63	0,80
ability to arrange care activities that should be carried out with the child/student	4,73	0,73
ability to organise activities to meet the health and medical needs of the child/student	4,64	0,74
ability to cooperate with the parents of the child/student supported	4,72	0,75
ability to cooperate with parents of children/students in the group/class the supported child/student attends	4,63	0,67

Competences	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologist, educational counsellors), students	4,73	0,87
ability to work in a team	4,76	0,71
ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner	4,73	0,77

Source: own study.

As the data in Table 8 indicate, the surveyed teachers rated all the psychosocial competences of the assistants highly. Of which, the following competences were most highly rated:

- > empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, openness to learning,
- > ability to relate to another person,
- > ability to observe and listen,
- > ability to work in a team,
- > ability to control emotions.

Still high, but in the context of the other assessments, the lowest category of positive response concerned:

- > competences related to the ability to react quickly,
- > identification of the types of activities for the child/student,
- > cooperation with parents.

High marks were also found in the surveyed teachers' assessment of the assistant's relationship with the child/student and the assistant's role in building the child's/student's relationship with others.

The presence of the assistant in the process of shaping the child's/student's relationship with peers in a group/class was rated very favourably (M=4.70; SD=0.77, definitely good: 187 – 77.6%, rather good: 43 – 17.8%, difficult to say: 4 – 1.7%, rather bad: 6 – 2.5%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

The support of the assistant in the development of the child's/student's social competence was rated even higher (M=4.75; SD=0.63, definitely good: 196 – 81.3%, rather good: 34 – 14.1%, difficult to say: 6 – 2.5%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).



At the same time, the surveyed teachers expressed a strongly positive opinion on the usefulness of the assistant in their work with the child/student ( $M=4.82$ ;  $SD=0.62$ , definitely good: 211 – 87.6%, rather good: 17 – 7.1%, difficult to say: 8 – 3.3%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

In addition, they assessed the extent to which the assistant working with the child/student with special educational needs displayed certain psychosocial, organisational and communicative competences. The results obtained in this respect are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10.** The extent of the assistant’s psychosocial, organisational and communicative competences as perceived by the teachers surveyed

Psychosocial competences	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
Resilience to stress and challenging situations	4,72	0,63
Ability to react quickly	4,71	0,61
Ability to make decisions	4,70	0,65
Ability to cope with difficulties	4,72	0,61
Perceptiveness	4,77	0,60
Divided attention	4,71	0,51
Ability to manage emotions	4,76	0,72
Responsibility	4,82	0,66
Ability to relate to others	4,76	0,56
Ability to observe and listen	4,79	0,70
Empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others	4,83	0,71
Openness to learning	4,77	0,67
Organisational competence	M	SD
Ability to plan and organise the child’s/student’s daily routine	4,59	0,76
Ability to determine the type of activity for the child/student	4,60	0,78
Ability to organize the care activities to be performed with the child/student	4,68	0,73

Psychosocial competences	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
Ability to organise activities related to meeting the health and medical needs of the child/student	4,61	0,75
Communicative competence	M	SD
Ability to cooperate with the parents of the child/student covered by assistance	4,72	0,82
Ability to cooperate with parents of children/students in the group/class the assisted student attends	4,62	0,77
Ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologists, educationalists), students	4,75	0,62
Ability to work in a team	4,75	
Ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the partner of the interaction	4,77	0,70

Source: own studies

The results obtained and presented in Table 9 confirm previous results regarding the assessment of the assistants' psychosocial competences. It is noteworthy that such competences were rated highest in comparison to communication and organisational competences, which were rated lowest.

According to the teachers surveyed, the highest rated competences were empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, responsibility and the ability to observe and listen. It should be noted that the assessment of the extent to which the other psychosocial competences were possessed was also high with  $M=4.70$  and above.

In the case of communicative competences, the teachers surveyed most highly perceived the assistant's ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner, as well as the ability to work in groups and the ability to cooperate with teachers and specialists, children/students.

Of the organisational competences, the greatest concentration was seen in the assistant's ability to organise care activities for the child/student.

### Opinion of the parents

Parents also expressed opinions on the work and competences of the assistant working with their child. When assessing the tasks to be performed by the assistant using the scale: definitely yes, rather yes, difficult to say, rather not, definitely not, the parents surveyed listed some activities as being of greater importance than others. The results are presented in Table 11.

**Table 11.** Tasks that the assistant should fulfil in the opinion of the parents surveyed

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		Difficult to say		Rather not		Definitely not	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assistance with mobility and commuting	67	19,5	56	16,3	34	9,9	93	27,0	94	27,3
Assistance with eating meals	34	9,9	45	13,1	35	10,2	86	25,0	144	41,9
Activities connected with hygiene and using the toilet	48	14,0	57	16,6	26	7,6	74	21,5	139	40,4
Supporting the child/student during classes to increase their activity and participation, i.e., by motivating them to make an effort, helping with the use of learning materials and aids and specialised equipment, assisting with taking notes, assistance related to the daily functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations	235	68,3	80	23,3	16	4,7	6	1,7	7	2,0
Taking action to remove barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment	151	43,9	98	28,5	44	12,8	21	6,1	30	8,7
Assisting the child/student with communication and participation in the group/class	178	51,7	100	29,1	25	7,3	28	8,1	13	3,8

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		Difficult to say		Rather not		Definitely not	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assistance with homework and participation in activities during classes	128	37,2	125	36,3	50	14,5	21	6,1	20	5,8
Support in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school	213	61,9	92	26,7	17	4,9	12	3,5	10	2,9
Assistance in solving problems related to the daily functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations	211	61,3	104	30,2	22	6,4	2	0,6	5	1,5
Cooperation with the family, teachers and educators and specialists in the kindergarten and school, administration and maintenance personnel of the kindergarten/school, and nurses, others as appropriate, including in the preparation of necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child	192	55,8	105	30,5	36	10,5	5	1,5	6	1,7
Participation in preparing an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in kindergarten/school	166	48,3	118	34,3	41	11,9	13	3,8	6	1,7
Reacting to child's/student's displays of self-aggression and/or aggressive behaviour	216	62,8	63	18,3	30	8,7	17	4,9	18	5,2
Concern for the child's/student's well-being	240	69,8	88	25,6	12	3,5	3	0,9	1	0,3
Performing/assisting a child/student with specialised medical procedures related to his/her disability	44	12,8	44	12,8	40	11,6	71	20,6	145	42,2

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		Difficult to say		Rather not		Definitely not	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Participation in meetings aimed at assessing the child/student's level of functioning, with the intention of removing barriers and limitations in the environment	159	46,2	118	34,3	31	9,0	22	6,4	14	4,1
Participation in the drafting of an opinion on the child's functioning in kindergarten and school, in close cooperation with teachers	171	49,7	127	36,9	29	2,4	8	2,3	9	2,6
Activities connected with supervision of the child/student's intake of medications and administration of long-term medications, supervision of the child's/student's use of medical equipment and providing assistance in using permanent medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation), operation of specialised equipment	43	12,5	28	8,1	39	11,3	76	22,1	158	45,9
Communication and interaction (e.g. assistive and alternative communication methods)	123	35,8	96	27,9	44	12,8	26	7,6	55	16,0
Support for a child/student with behavioural disorders or displaying problematic/risky behaviour (prevention of problem situations, taking care of child/student safety, intervention in case of so-called high-risk situations)	185	53,8	80	23,3	31	9,0	14	4,1	34	9,9

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		Difficult to say		Rather not		Definitely not	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Supporting the child's/student's adjustment to the kindergarten/school environment by, inter alia, providing emotional support and direct assistance in coping with new situations	219	63,7	88	25,6	16	4,7	9	2,6	12	3,5
Assisting a child on the way to and from school	34	9,9	25	7,3	32	9,3	94	27,3	159	46,2
Assisting the child/student in developing social contacts, using cultural services, recreation	170	49,4	126	36,6	30	8,7	9	2,6	9	2,6
Concern for the child's well-being while in care, including the child's mental functioning	212	61,6	119	34,6	9	2,6	0	0	4	1,2

Source: own study.

Based on these results, it is clear that parents' expectations of the assistant's work are very specific. They were strongly in favour of the following tasks to be carried out by the assistant in his/her work (indicated by more than 50% of respondents):

- › concern for the child's/student's well-being;
- › supporting the child during activities;
- › supporting his/her adaptation to the preschool/school environment;
- › reacting to manifestations of aggression and/or auto-aggression;
- › supporting the child in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school;
- › assistance in solving problems related to the daily functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations;
- › concern for the child's well-being;

- › cooperation with the family, teachers and specialists;
- › support for the child with behavioural disorders or displaying risky behaviour;
- › assisting the child/student with communication and participation in the group/class.

Parents' expectations are by far the lowest with regard to the following tasks of the assistant:

- › assisting the child on the way to and from kindergarten/school;
- › supervising the child's intake of medication and the administration of permanent medication;
- › supervising the child's use of medical equipment and assisting in the use of permanently used medical equipment;
- › performing/assisting the child with special medical procedures related to disability;
- › assistance with eating meals;
- › assisting the child with hygiene and using the toilet.

Later in the questionnaire, the surveyed parents indicated the tasks that were fulfilled by the assistant as part of his/her work with the child. The results obtained in this respect are presented in Table 12.

**Table 12.** Tasks performed by the assistant in the opinion of parents surveyed

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		No opinion		Rather not		Definitely not		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assistance with mobility and commuting	91	39,1	24	10,3	3	1,3	6	2,6	5	2,1	103	44,2
Assistance with eating meals	87	37,3	18	7,7	6	2,6	5	2,1	12	5,2	103	44,2
Activities connected with hygiene and using the toilet	85	36,5	19	8,2	5	2,1	8	3,4	11	4,7	103	44,2

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		No opinion		Rather not		Definitely not		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Supporting the child/student during classes to increase their activity and participation, i.a. by motivating them to make an effort, helping with the use of learning materials and aids and specialised equipment, assisting with taking notes	180	77,3	41	17,6	6	2,6	3	1,3	3	1,3	0	0
Taking action to remove barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment	109	37,5	36	12,4	7	2,4	6	2,1	2	0,7	92	31,6
Assisting the child/student with communication and participation in the group of peers/class	135	46,4	43	14,8	6	2,1	4	1,4	4	1,4	46	15,8
Assistance with homework and participation in activities during classes	159	54,6	44	15,1	9	3,1	5	1,7	2	0,7	16	5,5
Support in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school	117	40,2	41	14,1	7	2,4	3	1,0	5	1,7	75	25,8
Assistance in solving problems related to daily functioning of the child/student in and outside the establishment	164	56,4	46	15,8	3	1,0	2	0,7	4	1,4	13	4,5
Cooperation with the family, teachers and educators, as well as specialists (including in the preparation of the necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child)	151	51,9	49	16,8	9	3,1	4	1,4	2	0,7	19	6,5
Reacting to child's/student's displays of self-aggression and/or aggressive behaviour and aggressive behaviour of peers towards the child	217	74,6	53	18,2	8	2,7	5	1,7	5	1,7	0	0



Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		No opinion		Rather not		Definitely not		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Concern for the child's/ student's well-being in and outside the establishment	126	43,3	39	13,4	10	3,4	6	2,1	4	1,4	59	20,3
Assisting the child with specialised medical procedures connected with the child's illness or disability	35	12,0	10	3,4	7	2,4	3	1,0	10	3,4	211	72,3
Activities connected with supervision of the child/ student's intake of medications and administration of long-term medications, supervision of the child's/student's use of medical equipment and providing assistance in using permanent medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation), operation of specialised equipment	35	12,0	10	3,4	7	2,4	3	1,0	10	3,4	211	72,3
Communication and interaction with the child using articulate speech, but also assistive and alternative methods of communication	21	7,2	7	2,4	4	1,4	2	0,7	12	4,1	233	80,1
Support for a child/student with behavioural disorders or displaying problematic/risky behaviour (prevention of problem situations, taking care of child/student safety, intervention in case of so-called high-risk situations)*	83	28,5	34	11,7	12	4,1	2	0,7	5	1,7	124	42,6

Tasks	Definitely yes		Rather yes		No opinion		Rather not		Definitely not		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Supporting the child's/student's adjustment to the kindergarten/school environment by, inter alia, providing emotional support and direct assistance in coping with new situations	122	41,9	44	15,1	8	2,7	3	1,0	4	1,4	64	22,0
assisting the child on the way to and from kindergarten/school	134	46,0	44	15,1	5	1,7	3	1,0	1	0,3	52	17,9
Assisting the child/student in developing social contacts, using cultural services, recreation	156	53,6	50	17,2	2	0,7	4	1,4	2	0,7	19	6,5

\*Does not apply to children that do not exhibit the indicated behaviour

Source: own study.

When evaluating the tasks that the assistants fulfilled in the course of their work, the majority of parents indicated the following:

- › providing support to the child during activities to increase their activity and participation (over 77% of respondents),
- › reacting to child's/student's displays of self-aggression and/or aggressive behaviour and aggressive behaviour of peers towards the child (almost 75% of respondents).

More than half of the respondents indicated:

- › assistance in solving problems related to the child's daily life in and outside the establishment (more than 56% of respondents),
- › help in doing homework,
- › assistance in participating in activities during care activities (almost 55% of respondents).

They further pointed out certain activities that were not within the scope of the assistants' tasks:

- › communicating using alternative methods of communication,

- › performing activities related to supervising the child's intake of medication and administering medications used on a regular basis,
- › supervising the child's use of medical equipment and assisting in the use of medical equipment used permanently.

It is worth emphasising that more than 40% of respondents indicated that the following activities were missing from the assistants' scope of work:

- › assistance with mobility and commuting,
- › assistance with eating meals,
- › assistance with hygiene and using the toilet,
- › support for a child with behavioural disorders or displaying problematic/risky behaviour.

What is striking, however, is that almost one-third of the activities intended to eliminate barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment were not present in the assistant's work.

When completing the question regarding the tasks carried out by the assistant, the parents surveyed rated them using the scale: 1 – very bad, 2 – bad, 3 – average, 4 – good, 5 – very good, 6 – not applicable (where the assistant was not responsible for the task in question). The results obtained in this respect are presented in Table 13.

**Table 13.** Parent's evaluation of the tasks carried out by the assistant

Tasks	Very good		Good		Average		Bad		Very bad		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
assisting the child in commuting to and from the establishment, in the establishment, during transport	74	31,8	14	6,0	1	0,4	0	0	1	0,4	143	61,4
assisting the child with eating meals	88	37,8	17	7,3	5	2,1	2	0,9	1	0,4	120	51,5
assisting the child with activities related to hygiene and the use of the toilet	89	38,2	21	9,0	0	0	1	0,4	2	0,9	120	51,5

Tasks	Very good		Good		Average		Bad		Very bad		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
support of the child/student during activities to increase the child's/student's involvement and participation, e.g. by motivating the child/student to make an effort	178	76,4	35	15,0	7	3,0	1	0,4	2	0,9	10	4,3
assistance with using educational materials and aids as well as specialised equipment	153	65,7	45	19,3	3	1,3	1	0,4	3	1,3	28	12,0
assistance with taking notes *1	119	51,1	27	11,6	4	1,7	1	0,4	2	0,9	80	34,3
taking action to remove barriers and limitations in the child's/student's immediate environment	146	62,7	34	14,6	2	0,9	2	0,9	4	1,7	45	19,3
assisting the child to communicate and participate in the class/group	173	74,2	37	15,9	6	2,6	1	0,4	2	0,9	14	6,0
assisting the child with homework	90	38,6	29	12,4	3	1,3	2	0,9	2	0,9	107	45,9
support in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten and school	168	72,1	41	17,6	6	2,6	1	0,4	4	1,7	13	5,6
assistance in solving problems related to the daily functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations	175	75,1	39	16,7	6	2,6	2	0,9	3	1,3	8	3,4
cooperation with the child's family	185	79,4	25	10,7	9	3,9	2	0,9	4	1,7	8	3,4
cooperation with teachers and educators and specialists in the kindergarten/school	186	79,8	30	12,9	7	3,0	2	0,9	2	0,9	6	2,6

Tasks	Very good		Good		Average		Bad		Very bad		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
cooperation with the administration and maintenance personnel of the kindergarten/school, the nurse, other persons working or operating on the premises of the kindergarten/school	169	72,5	42	18,0	5	2,1	1	0,4	2	0,9	12	5,2
preparing the necessary equipment and learning aids for the child	140	60,1	39	16,7	8	3,4	1	0,4	3	1,3	42	18,0
Reacting to child's/student's displays of self-aggression and/or aggressive behaviour as well as peer aggression towards the child (if it has occurred)	136	58,4	30	12,9	5	2,1	4	1,7	1	0,4	57	24,5
concern for the child's/student's well-being in and out of the establishment	184	79,0	33	14,2	4	1,7	3	1,3	2	0,9	7	3,0
assisting the child in specialised medical procedures related to their disability* <sup>2</sup>	43	18,5	10	4,3	1	0,4	0	0	2	0,9	177	76,0

\*1 – not applicable to preschool children;

\*2 – applicable to children with disabilities

Source: own study.

The vast majority of parents surveyed rated the assistant's tasks highly using the category: very good. Parents were mostly satisfied with the assistant's tasks connected to:

- › cooperation with teachers and educators and specialists in the kindergarten/school;
- › cooperation with the child's family;

- › concern for the child's well-being in and out of the establishment;
- › supporting the child during preschool/school activities by increasing their involvement and participation;
- › assistance in solving problems in the daily functioning of the child in educational and care situations (more than 75% of indications).

It is worth noting that it was extremely rare for the categories bad or very bad to be used to evaluate the tasks performed by the assistant.

The lowest frequency of positive evaluations is seen in tasks that most parents indicated as unrelated to the assistant's work and duties, such as:

- › assisting the child with specialised medical procedures related to his/her disability,
- › assisting the child in commuting to and from the establishment, getting around in the establishment,
- › assisting the child in mobility.

When asked to indicate positive aspects in the work of the assistant in the kindergarten/school, the parents pointed out the following:

- › meeting the child's needs as necessary, responding at appropriate times;
- › communicating problems and positive developments concerning the child on an ongoing basis;
- › supporting the child's independence and safety;
- › demonstrating helpfulness;
- › demonstrating patience;
- › demonstrating motivation to undertake a variety of activities;
- › high dedication to helping the child;
- › an empathetic, communicative attitude; ensuring a very good rapport with the child;
- › active support of the child in various challenging situations, including conflict resolution;
- › conscientiousness in carrying out tasks;
- › looking for a variety of solutions that can help the child;
- › concern for a very good contact with the child's family;
- › being fully aware of one's role;

- › motivating the child to effectively cope with a wide range of everyday difficult situations;
- › providing emotional support both to the child and parents;
- › supporting social relationships, nurturing the child's relationships with peers;
- › cooperation and high willingness to communicate with all those involved in the child's development;
- › high degree of creativity directed at optimising ways to increase the child's independence and involvement.

Parents were also asked to list any negative aspects of the assistant's work. However, it is worth noting at this point that the vast majority of respondents (201 – 86.27%) did not observe any unfavourable elements in the assistant's performance. The ones noticed included such issues as:

- › too short a period of assistance provided;
- › relieving the child of too many responsibilities;
- › lack of specialised knowledge about the child's disorder/disease, its psychosocial consequences; little attention to the quality of the information provided;
- › low commitment to helping the child;
- › lack of cooperation with parents;
- › lack of predisposition to work with a child with disabilities;
- › lack of experience in working with children with disorders;
- › vaguely defined scope of the assistant's duties, which made it difficult to formulate expectations and cooperate with the assistant;
- › inadequate response to various aggressive acts of the child.

The parents surveyed also expressed their views on the need for a systemic solution whereby assistants for children with special educational needs could be employed in educational institutions. The vast majority of respondents (186 – 79.8%) opted for yes, 47 (20.2%) respondents remained undecided. There were no dissenting opinions on this issue. The following reasons were most often used to justify the position expressed:

- › the need for an assistant to improve the child's functioning in the kindergarten/school;

- › the assistant aids the work of the teacher, who can optimise his/her interactions to a greater extent;
- › ensure the safety of the child;
- › provides support that is appropriate to the situation through the use of specialist knowledge;
- › the work of the assistant is essential as the Polish education system is not prepared to accommodate children with special educational needs; the assistant builds a bridge between the child requiring help/care and its peers and teachers;
- › the assistant serves as an anchor of support for the student, both in the learning process and in relationships with peers;
- › creates comfortable setting and a sense of security in parents that their child, whatever his or her needs, is well looked after;
- › employing an assistant is the best solution oriented towards the welfare of the child;
- › addresses the needs of those children who do not find adequate support in kindergarten/school due to specific needs and dysfunctions;
- › the work of the assistant complements the comprehensive support;
- › reinforces the efforts of the teacher, who on a day-to-day basis is unable to provide adequate support for every child with special educational needs;
- › employing an assistant requires clear rules for his or her functioning and financing.

### Assistants' self-assessment

One important element of the study was the assistants' self-assessment in terms of their work. The assistants recruited for the project assessed their competences and their preparation for work as a teaching assistant using a 5-point scale, where 1 – means not at all, 2 – poorly; 3 – average; 4 – well; 5 – very well.

The self-assessment was completed by a group of 435 individuals. The respondents' assessment of their psychosocial, organisational and communicative competences is included in Table 14.



**Table 14.** Possession of competences to work as a child's/student's assistant in the opinion of the surveyed assistants

Competences	Not at all		Poorly		Average		Well		Very well	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Psychosocial competences</b>										
I was resilient to stress and challenging situations	2	0,5	5	1,1	33	7,6	193	44,4	202	46,4
I was able to react quickly	1	0,2	0	0	10	2,3	147	33,8	277	63,7
I was able to make decisions	1	0,2	0	0	7	1,6	171	39,3	256	58,9
I was able to handle difficulties	1	0,2	1	0,2	22	5,1	182	41,8	229	52,6
I was observant	1	0,2	1	0,2	9	2,1	144	33,1	280	64,4
I divided my attention	1	0,2	3	0,7	13	3,0	137	31,5	281	64,6
I was able to control my emotions	1	0,2	1	0,2	14	3,2	142	32,6	277	63,7
I was responsible	2	0,5	0	0	2	0,5	76	17,5	355	81,6
I was able to establish contact with another person	2	0,5	1	0,2	2	0,5	98	22,5	332	76,3
I was able to observe and listen	2	0,5	0	0	2	0,5	95	21,8	336	77,2
I was empathetic and sensitive to the needs of the child/student and people around them	2	0,5	0	0	3	0,7	73	16,8	357	82,1
I was open to learning	3	0,7	0	0	6	1,4	102	23,4	324	74,5
<b>Organisational competences</b>										
I was able to plan and organise the child's/student's daily routine.	2	0,5	4	0,9	23	5,3	164	37,7	242	55,6
I was able to identify the type of activities for the child/student	1	0,2	2	0,5	29	6,7	170	39,1	233	53,6

Competences	Not at all		Poorly		Average		Well		Very well	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I was able to organise the care activities that should be carried out with the child/student	2	0,5	3	0,7	17	3,9	141	32,4	272	62,5
I was able to organise activities related to meeting the health and medical needs of the child/student	10	2,3	6	1,4	38	8,7	146	33,6	235	54,0
<b>Communicative competence</b>										
I was able to cooperate with the parents of the child/student receiving support	6	1,4	3	0,7	20	4,6	117	26,9	289	66,4
I was able to cooperate with parents of children/students belonging to the group/class the assisted student attends	7	1,6	5	1,1	20	4,6	154	35,4	249	57,2
I was able to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologist, educational counsellors), students	0	0	2	0,5	10	2,3	79	19,2	344	79,1
I was able to work in a team	1	0,2	1	0,2	5	1,1	89	20,5	339	77,9
I was able to adapt the communication to the capabilities and needs of the partner of the interaction	3	0,7	1	0,2	17	3,9	139	32,0	275	63,2

Source: own study.

When assessing own psychosocial competences, the majority of the assistants indicated that they were competent, with the exception of competence in the form of resilience to stress and challenging situations, pointed out by less than half of the respondents.

Psychosocial competences possessed by the vast majority of respondents include:

- > being responsible;
- > being empathetic and sensitive to the needs of the child/student and those around them;

- › the ability to observe and listen; to connect with another person;
- › openness to learning.

In doing so, it should be noted that very often respondents indicated that they had competences such as:

- › reacting quickly;
- › being attentive;
- › being able to divide one's attention;
- › being in control of one's emotions.

The majority of respondents also indicated having organisational competence. With the highest frequency highlighting the ability to organise the care activities that should be performed with the child/student.

When it came to assessing communicative competences, respondents, again in the majority, indicated that they had them, emphasising that they were used well or very well. The vast majority of respondents emphasised competences concerning the following:

- › cooperation with teachers and specialists,
- › teamwork skills.

It should be noted that organisational competences received the lowest rating when compared to psychosocial and communicative competences.

The surveyed assistants also assessed their preparation for the tasks of their job. The results obtained in this respect are presented in Table 14. When assessing the degree of satisfaction of the child/student with the assistant's support, they gave it a high ranking  $M=4.70$  ( $SD=0.57$ ), taking into account a 5-point scale (where 1 – very dissatisfied, 5 – very satisfied).

**Table 15.** Preparedness to perform tasks as a child's/student's assistant in the opinion of surveyed assistants

Self-assessment	Not at all		Poorly		Average		Well		Very well	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I was able to document the course of my daily work with the child/student	4	0,9	9	2,1	41	1,4	156	35,9	225	51,7

Self-assessment	Not at all		Poorly		Average		Well		Very well	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I was able to monitor and carry out periodical evaluation of my work with the child/student	3	0,7	5	1,1	44	10,1	169	38,9	214	49,2
I was able to work as part of an integrated team to meet the child's/student's objectives in relation to his/her functional diagnosis	4	0,9	2	0,5	27	6,2	158	36,3	244	56,1
I was able to carefully observe the child/student in various situations in kindergarten/school	2	0,5	1	0,2	5	1,1	87	20,0	340	78,2
I was able to support the independence and individuality of the child/student	2	0,5	0	0	12	2,8	109	25,1	312	71,7
I was prepared to assist the child in getting around and commuting	7	1,6	5	1,1	35	8,0	111	25,5	277	63,7
I was prepared to assist the child with eating meals	13	3,0	7	1,6	35	8,0	110	25,3	270	62,1
I was prepared to perform activities related to child's hygiene and using the toilet	14	3,2	6	1,4	38	8,7	112	25,7	265	60,9
I was prepared to supervise the child's intake of medicines and to administer long-term medication, operate specialised equipment	55	12,6	18	4,1	46	10,6	115	26,4	201	46,2
I was prepared to help the child with homework and with care activities	10	2,3	2	0,5	22	5,1	108	24,8	293	67,4

Self-assessment	Not at all		Poorly		Average		Well		Very well	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I was able to support the child in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school	1	0,2	1	0,2	5	1,1	107	24,6	321	73,8
I have considered the child's/student's subjectivity, choices and decisions	4	0,9	0	0	9	2,1	114	26,2	308	70,8

Source: own study.

The obtained results indicate that the surveyed assistants rated their preparation for their work with a child/student with special educational needs relatively high. However, with regard to certain areas, less than half of the respondents assessed their preparation as sufficient, these include:

- › supervising the child's intake of medication and the administration of long term medication;
- › operation of specialised equipment and monitoring and conducting periodic evaluation of their work with the child/student.
- › In contrast, the vast majority of respondents considered themselves to be well-prepared in the following areas:
- › carefully observing the child/student in various situations in the kindergarten/school;
- › supporting the child/student in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarten/school;
- › supporting the child's/student's independence and individuality;
- › respecting the child's/student's subjectivity, choices and decisions.

A relatively low percentage of respondents indicated a lack of preparation concerning particular aspects of the assistant's work. This is reflected in opinions expressed by about 3% of respondents declaring a lack of preparation for performing activities related to hygiene and using the toilet with the child, as well as for helping the child to eat meals.

### 2.3.4. Impact of the assistant's presence on the functioning of the student

One concomitant element of the study was to identify whether, and to what extent, the presence of the assistant was of significance to the quality of the child's/student's functioning in the kindergarten/school. Data on the child's/student's functioning were collected from teachers and parents and are analysed in this subsection.

#### Opinion of the teachers

First of all, the teachers surveyed assessed the child's/student's level of functioning in different dimensions: physical (gross motor skills, fine motor skills), intellectual (school achievement), school knowledge and skills (level of mastery of school techniques), social-emotional. The measurement was carried out twice, I – at the beginning of the assistant's work, II – after 9 months of the assistant's work. The assessment was made using the 5-point scale, where 5 means very good mastery of skills and abilities and 1 means no mastery of skills and abilities. The results were analysed using Student's t-test for dependent data. Table 16 shows the assessment of the student's physical development.

**Table 16.** Level of physical functioning of the child/student with SEN after 9 months of assistance as assessed by the teachers surveyed

Abilities and skills	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after 9 months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Gross motor skills						
Maintains body balance	3,64	1,02	3,78	1,03	-1,54	0,124
Has correct posture	3,63	1,06	3,68	1,04	-0,53	0,598
Has good coordination of limb movements	3,41	1,02	3,43	1,03	-0,24	0,814

Abilities and skills	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after 9 months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Demonstrates agility in team sports	2,99	1,19	3,10	1,25	-1,03	0,305
Eagerly participates in physical games and activities	3,31	1,29	3,53	1,23	-1,23	0,043*
Fine motor skills						
Manipulates objects in order to perform a task	3,60	1,07	3,75	1,19	-1,62	0,106
Can draw well	3,08	1,17	3,28	1,06	-1,96	0,047*
Catches objects properly	3,66	1,10	3,83	0,99	-1,74	0,051~
Properly holds school and drawing accessories	3,46	1,02	3,64	0,97	-1,73	0,083
Uses both hands in a coordinated way	3,27	1,05	3,43	1,12	-1,59	0,113
Seems dexterous	3,21	1,11	3,46	0,96	-1,81	0,049*
Sensory perception						
Sight	3,91	1,02	3,92	1,11	-1,26	0,993
Hearing	3,93	0,99	4,03	0,78	-1,16	0,247
Touch	3,86	1,05	4,04	1,12	-2,13	0,034*
Smell	4,13	1,18	4,23	0,87	-1,21	0,227
Taste	4,07	1,02	4,19	1,05	-1,49	0,067~

\*  $p < 0,05$ ;

~ approaching statistical significance

Source: own study.

The results presented in Table 15 reveal that, in general, the surveyed teachers rated the level of each ability/skill defined for the physical development of the child/student higher. At the same time, significant changes in the level of physical functioning after nine months of the assistant's work were noticed in only four skills, and in two there was a trend towards a statistically significant difference.

The teachers surveyed estimated that children/students who received assistance were able to achieve significantly higher levels:

- › of motivation to participate in physical games and activities,
- › in terms of good execution of drawings,
- › in terms of dexterity.

Considerably higher scores were also found in tactile perception. At the level of tendency toward statistical significance, the proper grasping of objects and taste perception were rated higher in children/students. As far as the other indicators of the child's/student's physical development were concerned, no statistically significant differences were found after nine months of the assistant's work with a child/student with SEN, according to the teachers surveyed.

**Table 17.** Level of intellectual functioning of the child/student with SEN after nine months of the assistant's work in the opinion of the teachers surveyed

Cognitive processes	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after 9 months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Visual and auditory perception						
He/she is perceptive	3,90	0,91	3,95	0,98	-0,46	0,323
Identifies similarities and differences	3,62	1,02	3,94	1,13	-2,43	0,008*
Understands information relevant to the topic under discussion	3,61	0,87	4,02	0,90	-3,85	<0,001
Quickly finds information in visual material	3,46	1,05	3,93	0,97	-3,63	<0,001
Is able to copy information from the board	3,53	1,05	3,73	0,13	-1,47	0,071~
Writes down what he/she hears	3,07	1,12	3,60	1,09	-3,68	<0,001



Cognitive processes	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after 9 months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Attention						
Remains focused during classes, is able to concentrate on a task for a long period of time	2,71	1,02	2,80	1,19	-0,97	0,331
Is persistent in his/her work	2,83	0,99	2,93	0,89	-1,01	0,312
Is able to work despite distractions	2,62	1,13	2,63	1,19	-0,18	0,897
Is able to concentrate on the teacher's instructions	2,79	1,23	2,97	1,28	-1,91	0,053~
Is able to divide attention	2,45	0,87	2,61	0,88	-1,62	0,108
Is able to remember the instructions given	2,82	1,01	3,05	1,08	-2,61	0,008*
Memory						
Easily learns by heart	2,80	1,03	3,08	0,99	-2,48	0,013*
Can memorise dictated text	2,57	1,12	2,73	1,09	-1,39	0,163
Can reproduce a variety of content	2,68	0,87	2,84	0,89	-1,50	0,133
Makes proper connections/remembers more difficult (new, technical) phrases introduced in the classroom	2,64	0,92	2,87	0,98	-2,03	0,042*
Can do mental calculations	2,73	0,97	3,01	1,02	-2,32	0,021*
Can remember tasks given by the teacher	2,78	1,05	3,02	0,96	-2,43	0,016*
Thinking						

Cognitive processes	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after 9 months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Quickly identifies links between various concepts	2,62	1,01	2,85	0,98	-2,02	0,041*
Quickly connects facts, information	2,75	1,11	2,99	1,10	-2,21	0,027*
Is able to generalise different pieces of information	2,63	1,02	2,79	0,88	-1,52	0,129
Draws correct conclusions	2,74	1,13	2,94	1,07	-1,88	0,083
Makes accurate associations	2,85	1,18	3,05	1,15	-1,86	0,063~
Gives interesting and unconventional ideas for solving different problems	2,54	1,23	2,74	1,09	-1,88	0,069~
Is able to present his/her own point of view	2,76	1,12	2,97	0,98	-1,76	0,069~
Analyses different contents properly	2,52	1,15	2,72	0,99	-1,81	0,069~
Takes the initiative to work mentally	2,56	1,09	2,81	1,13	-2,39	0,017*

\*  $p < 0,05$ ;

~ approaching statistical significance

Source: own study.

The results obtained on the assessment of the child's/student's intellectual level after nine months of assistance given by the teachers surveyed indicate considerably higher functioning in a number of aspects under consideration. Significant positive changes were noted in all types of cognitive processes.

In the area of visual and auditory perception, the teachers surveyed reported that children/students were significantly better at:

- › being able to identify similarities and differences,
- › grasping information relevant to the topic under discussion,
- › finding information in visual materials quickly,
- › writing down what has been said.

They were also more capable of reproducing what was on the blackboard (tendency toward statistically significant difference).

With regard to attention, significantly higher results were observed in remembering instructions given to the child/student; at the level of tendency toward statistical significance, higher results were further revealed in the ability to concentrate on the teacher's instructions. In the other elements related to attention, no statistically significant difference was found after nine months of assistant work. Although it is worth noting that these results were higher, they failed to approach the level of statistical significance.

Under the category of memory, significantly higher performance was perceived in:

- › learning by heart,
- › making correct associations,
- › memorising phrases presented during classes,
- › doing mental calculations,
- › memorising tasks given by the teacher.

In the area of reasoning, however, significantly higher results in children/students are found for:

- › the ability to quickly see the connections between various concepts,
- › taking the initiative to do mental work.

In addition, higher results, albeit at a level approaching statistical significance, were recorded in making accurate associations, producing new, unconventional ideas, presenting one's own point of view and making accurate analyses of a variety of content.

In the next stage of the study, the surveyed teachers assessed school knowledge and skills; the results obtained are presented in Table 18.

**Table 18.** Knowledge and school skills of the child/student with SEN after nine months of assistant work in the opinion of the teachers surveyed

School knowledge and skills	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Level of mastery of school techniques	2,68	1,38	2,89	1,32	-1,78	0,074~
Reading						
Reads at the level required for the relevant grade	2,47	1,53	2,70	1,51	-1,68	0,087
Reads full sentences fluently	2,24	1,47	2,42	1,50	-1,32	0,187
Reads with appropriate intonation	2,10	1,33	2,27	1,37	-1,41	0,157
Reads at a good pace (for a given age)	2,25	1,47	2,50	1,51	-1,89	0,057~
Writing						
Writes at the level required for the relevant grade	2,30	1,38	2,49	1,34	-1,61	0,107
Writes correctly in terms of spelling, grammar, style	1,98	1,26	2,13	1,25	-1,34	0,180
Good writing speed	2,10	1,20	2,22	1,27	-1,05	0,294
Writes neatly, legibly	2,10	1,27	2,30	1,12	-1,72	0,087
Calculations						
Counts at the level required for the relevant grade	2,72	1,48	2,92	1,42	-1,49	0,135
Knows the multiplication table	2,00	1,42	2,29	1,50	-2,08	0,037*
Can efficiently do mental calculations at the level required for the relevant grade	2,41	1,45	2,64	1,48	-1,77	0,076~

School knowledge and skills	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Uses numeracy skills in practice	2,50	1,44	2,70	1,48	-1,58	0,119
Speech/communication						
Articulates correctly	3,09	1,23	3,22	1,22	-1,17	0,341
Uses proper grammar	3,09	1,19	3,25	1,21	-1,44	0,150
Uses proper style	3,00	1,26	3,17	1,28	-1,78	0,148
Formulates sentences and statements correctly	3,04	1,32	3,24	1,27	-1,56	0,075~
His/her speech is fluent and developed	2,72	1,19	2,90	1,23	-1,67	0,093
Is eager to speak	2,96	1,18	3,18	1,16	-1,56	0,054~
Easily verbalises his/her own thoughts	2,78	1,25	2,99	1,17	-1,65	0,063~
Interests and talents						
Has socially acceptable interests	3,72	1,14	3,90	1,19	-1,48	0,138
Has socially unacceptable interests	2,13	1,34	2,54	1,29	-1,77	0,075~
Shares his/her interests	3,17	1,22	3,50	1,30	-2,31	0,021*
Presents his/her interests in front of the group and/or school	2,92	1,17	3,28	1,52	-2,36	0,019*
Devotes free time to broadening his/her interests and passions	3,07	1,14	3,44	1,17	-2,37	0,018*
Shows interest in school activities	2,67	1,22	2,95	1,29	-1,98	0,066~

\*  $p < 0,05$ ;

~ approaching statistical significance;

the indicated school skills do not apply to preschool children

Source: own study.

In all of the included preschool/school knowledge and skills of a child/student, higher scores were reported in the second measurement, i.e. after nine months of assistantship. However, only some of them showed a statistically significant difference or a trend towards a statistically significant difference.

Mastery of school techniques was found to be higher as a result of working with an assistant (but merely approaching statistical significance). It is worth noting that there was no change at the level of statistical significance in the skills comprising reading and writing.

In the category of numeracy, there was a significantly higher score for familiarity with the multiplication table and a higher score for efficient mental calculation.

In the case of speech/communication, the marked changes did not reach the threshold of statistical significance, but only of trend. Higher scores were found for proper sentence formulation, willingness to speak and ease of verbalising thoughts. There were slightly more significant changes in the interest category. Students achieved significantly higher results (according to the teachers surveyed) in sharing their interests, presenting their interests in front of the group/school, and devoting their free time to expanding their interests.

A trend towards statistical significance was revealed in the aspect of interest in school activities, which was slightly higher as a consequence of the assistant's work.

The surveyed teachers were also asked to indicate the student's preferred subjects and activities, with a variety of types being identified. In their estimation, students' preferred subjects were:

- > art education/visual arts (41),
- > computer science (37),
- > music education/music (32),
- > English (31),
- > mathematics (29),
- > technical education (29),
- > language education/polish (26),
- > physical education (24),
- > history (13),

- › biology (7),
- › geography (7),
- › natural sciences (2).

In contrast, the preferred activities were:

- › drawing (18),
- › games, including physical activities (17),
- › painting (12),
- › reading (12),
- › writing (5),
- › building with blocks (5),
- › dancing (4),
- › gymnastics (3).

In total, 22 teachers declared that there was no subject of particular interest to the students. As many as 67 (29.92%) of the surveyed teachers pointed to the absence of extracurricular interests among children/students. The others listed, e.g. singing in a choir, acrobatics, astronomy, interactive games, playing football, being interested in dinosaurs, playing musical instruments, playing computer games, online games and board games, being interested in nature, animals, taking care of animals, cycling, painting, dancing, farming, playing with blocks, doing puzzles, playing technical games, mathematics, etc.

The surveyed teachers' assessment regarding the level of ability and the aspects that make up the socio-emotional development of the SEN student in the context of the assistant's work is included in Table 19.

**Table 19.** Socio-emotional development of the child/student with SEN after nine months of assistant work in the opinion of the teachers surveyed

Abilities/aspects of socio-emotional development	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Motivation						
Pays attention during lessons/classes	2,90	1,12	3,00	1,27	-0,98	0,371

Abilities/aspects of socio-emotional development	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Listens attentively to the teacher and colleagues who are speaking	2,82	1,23	3,00	1,15	-1,12	0,090
Participates actively in classes (speaking, taking notes)	2,74	1,21	2,98	1,19	-1,88	0,060~
Always comes prepared for lessons	2,80	1,34	2,82	1,42	-0,15	0,979
Is able to ask for help when he/she does not know something	2,50	1,22	2,62	1,16	-0,76	0,443
Does his/her homework	3,28	1,13	3,47	1,17	-1,15	0,129
Has the necessary learning aids at all times	3,81	1,19	3,95	1,24	-1,27	0,362
Is willing to do extra work	3,83	1,28	4,01	1,34	-2,38	0,205
Shares knowledge with others	2,57	1,22	2,94	1,19	-1,21	0,018*
Is persistent in his/her work	2,63	1,28	2,80	1,32	-0,76	0,215
Is willing to undertake assigned tasks	2,70	1,24	2,78	1,12	-1,14	0,500
Cooperates well in class	2,84	1,16	2,98	1,18	-1,11	0,252
Wants to learn and enjoys it	2,80	1,18	3,05	1,24	-2,32	0,020*
<b>Controlling emotions, dealing with challenging situations</b>						
Controls his/her behaviour in stressful situations	2,58	1,09	2,77	1,14	-1,71	0,088
Functions well under stress	2,32	1,11	2,53	1,21	-2,91	0,029*
Takes on challenging tasks and carries them out consistently	2,28	1,22	2,44	1,26	-1,54	0,049*



Abilities/aspects of socio-emotional development	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Can resolve conflicts constructively	2,15	1,27	2,40	1,22	-2,14	0,010*
Reacts calmly to opinions about oneself and to difficult situations that arise	2,42	1,34	2,58	1,38	-1,53	0,126
Takes initiative in order to solve a problem situation	2,32	1,16	2,55	1,19	-2,29	0,022*
Does not withdraw or become discouraged	2,38	1,29	2,55	1,32	-1,74	0,090
Keeps on working despite difficulties	2,35	1,14	2,53	1,21	-1,94	0,052~
<b>Child's/student's family environment</b>						
Parents are interested in their child's education	4,40	0,99	4,42	1,04	-0,24	0,807
Parents cooperate with teachers in matters relating to their child's education	4,38	1,22	4,42	1,19	-0,38	0,701
Parents provide their child with a suitable home learning environment	4,36	1,16	4,38	1,19	-0,17	0,885
Parents motivate their child to learn	4,12	1,12	4,13	1,17	-0,05	0,897
When their child has learning difficulties, parents support their child in overcoming them	4,20	1,18	4,22	1,14	-0,04	0,951
Parents are kept up to date on their child's school situation	4,55	1,19	4,57	1,23	-0,07	0,989
<b>Peer group</b>						
Maintains contact with peers who serve as positive role models	3,36	1,12	3,59	1,18	-2,38	0,017*

Abilities/aspects of socio-emotional development	Measurement at the beginning of assistant's work		Measurement after nine months of assistant's work		Test for significance of differences	
	M	SD	M	SD	T	p
Easily establishes positive peer relationships	3,01	0,98	3,36	1,05	-2,45	<0,001
Respects peers	3,40	1,16	3,54	1,19	-1,44	0,149
Can offer help when necessary	3,21	0,97	3,49	0,56	-2,25	0,022*
Is accepted by peers	3,82	1,14	4,01	1,22	-2,20	0,028*
Can work cooperatively with others	3,08	1,18	3,39	1,15	-3,11	0,002*
Serves as a positive role model for others	2,73	1,20	3,00	1,27	-2,50	0,013*
Does not give in to peer pressure and has own opinions	2,82	1,13	3,11	1,18	-1,79	0,074~
Has colleagues and friends	3,16	1,17	3,55	1,23	-3,85	<0,001
<b>School environment</b>						
Observes the norms and rules of the school	3,23	1,25	3,44	1,29	-1,88	0,060~
Is respectful towards others	3,48	1,22	3,58	1,26	-0,89	0,380
Attends school regularly	4,20	1,18	4,31	1,21	-1,24	0,214
Initiates various tasks for the benefit of the class and the school	2,35	1,26	2,65	1,30	-1,17	0,005*
Is active, helpful and willing to help others	2,94	1,27	3,14	1,28	-1,88	0,060~
Pursues his/her passions and interests	3,08	1,32	3,25	1,28	-1,63	0,102

\*  $p < 0,05$ ;

~ approaching statistical significance;

in the table data, skills specific to school children were derived exclusively from the group of school-educated children surveyed

Source: own study.

When analysing the results in terms of the assessed emotional and social development of children/students, it needs to be noted at the outset the relatively low levels of motivation and emotion control indicated, if compared to other aspects – relating to family, peer or preschool/school relationships.

The surveyed teachers perceive significant, beneficial changes in various elements of emotional and social development. In the sphere of motivation, significantly higher scores after nine months of assistant work were evident in:

- › sharing knowledge with others,
- › a desire to learn and enjoyment of learning.

Higher scores were also found in children's/students' activity in class (trend towards statistical significance).

More favourable changes resulting from the assistant's work were perceived in the area of controlling emotions and coping with stressful situations. The teachers surveyed pointed out that the child/student coped better with stress, took on and completed difficult tasks to a greater extent, resolved conflict situations more constructively and displayed greater problem-solving skills.

Higher results were also obtained in continuing activities despite difficulties (trend towards a statistically significant difference). Interestingly, the teachers rated the child's/student's relationship with the family environment and the parents' participation in the child's education relatively highly. Although the results are higher in the context of the assistant's work, changes did not materialise in this area at the level of statistical significance. They were, however, reflected at the level of relations with peers.

The teachers surveyed observed in children/students higher skills in maintaining contact with peers who were positive social role models, greater ease in establishing positive contacts with peers, providing help when needed, and cooperating with others.

Furthermore, they enjoyed considerably higher acceptance among peers, and they were treated as positive role models to a greater extent. They also had more colleagues and friends, and they acquired the ability not to give in to peer pressure and to express their own opinions more frequently (trend towards a statistically significant difference).

Additionally, a significantly higher score was found in the children's/ students' ability to initiate tasks for the benefit of the group/class and the kindergarten/school. They were perceived to be more active, helpful, and helping others (trend towards a statistically significant difference).

Finally, teachers indicated the strengths of the child/student at the beginning of the assistantship and after the 9-month course of work. In the initial survey, they listed a variety of qualities, skills, and general or more specific ones in children/students receiving assistance. Examples include:

- > analytical-synthetic skills,
- > interest in curiosities,
- > openness, positive attitude,
- > broad interests,
- > high motivation to perform tasks,
- > physical fitness,
- > attempts to communicate using alternative communication, the ability to easily interact with peers and adults,
- > quick adaptation to changes in the environment,
- > willingness to cooperate with the teacher, assistant,
- > commitment to tasks and responsibilities,
- > helpfulness, willingness to help peers,
- > active participation in compulsory and optional activities,
- > willing participation in physical and team games and activities,
- > high creativity in artistic activities, expressions,
- > cheerful disposition,
- > cognitive curiosity,
- > efficient teamwork,
- > adequate response to the teacher's instructions,
- > high organisational, leadership, social competences,
- > creativity and intelligent behaviour,
- > systematic and consistent attempts to improve academic and behavioural performance,
- > extensive general knowledge,
- > showing interest in specific subjects, conscientious performance of school tasks.

It is worth noting at this point that the teachers surveyed indicated to a comparable extent the strengths of the child/student both at the beginning of the assistant's work and afterwards. In doing so, they emphasised the child's/student's progress, whether in intellectual functioning, social functioning or emotional response.

Examples of strengths perceived after the assistant's work has concluded:

- › increased knowledge of the world,
- › improved auditory memory, spatial orientation,
- › very good cooperation,
- › positive attitude to other children and adults,
- › efficient communication with peers,
- › positive attitude to cooperation with peers,
- › superior networking skills,
- › ability to make use of different sources of information,
- › greater acceptance of one's imperfections resulting from disability,
- › increase in the child's self-care skills,
- › ease in making contact with adults,
- › increased ability to remember information,
- › better understanding of social norms,
- › greater willingness to participate in team games,
- › willingness to share their own interests,
- › higher motivation to perform tasks,
- › developing interests,
- › attention to meticulous preparation for lessons,
- › better handling of emotions,
- › greater readiness to deal with challenging situations.

Teachers were also asked twice about the student's weaknesses (at the beginning and after the assistantship). In the first measurement, the teachers surveyed listed such weaknesses of the student as:

- › failure to follow classroom and school norms and rules,
- › frequently distracted during assignments,
- › poor control of emotions,
- › failure to cope with change,
- › difficulty concentrating attention,

- › auditory hypersensitivity,
- › difficulty understanding social situations and responding appropriately,
- › a child/student requires repetition of instructions to perform tasks,
- › quick discouragement, inconsistency of actions,
- › low graphomotor skills,
- › poor communication with others,
- › lack of control over emotions and own behaviour,
- › very low motivation to learn,
- › lack of self-confidence,
- › lack of independence in carrying out school duties,
- › increased aggression,
- › lack of ability to cope with difficulties,
- › behaviour inadequate to the situation,
- › withdrawal, disregard for relationships with peers,
- › tendency to create conflict,
- › tendency to overreact in an emotional way to obstacles or limitations,
- › egocentrism,
- › rapid deconcentration of attention,
- › difficulties with adaptation,
- › low acceptance of oneself and one's limitations,
- › hyperactivity, hypersensitivity,
- › difficulties in understanding and managing one's own and other people's emotions, difficulties in understanding and controlling one's own and other people's emotions,
- › inability to accept instructions from the group, poor articulation, etc.

In the second measurement, the surveyed teachers continued to recognise the student's weaknesses but highlighted the lower severity of some of them. The indicated weaknesses of the child/student included the following:

- › social withdrawal,
- › resignation in case of difficulties,
- › failure to follow group rules,
- › difficulties with eye-hand coordination,
- › attention deficit disorder,

- › being subject to negative influences,
- › difficulty in maintaining satisfactory contact with peers,
- › slightly higher, but still weak motivation to learn,
- › poor commitment to learning.
- › poor control of emotions,
- › attention deficit,
- › emotional lability combined with self-aggression,
- › significant difficulties in completing tasks independently and bringing them to completion,
- › persistent problems with establishing and maintaining deeper relationships with peers,
- › verbal limitations,
- › inadequate reactions to criticism,
- › poor eye-hand coordination,
- › quick fatigue.

At the conclusion of their assessments, the teachers interviewed suggested possible reasons for children's/students' educational difficulties. They considered these to include students' limitations stemming from disabilities, illness, deficits or difficult life and environmental experiences of the children/students, but also pointed to:

- › non-harmonious cognitive development,
- › difficulties in communication,
- › inconsistency in parenting practices,
- › educational negligence,
- › community neglect,
- › excessive parental pressure on the child's progress,
- › lack of motivation to learn,
- › no motivation for intellectual effort,
- › difficulty in managing emotions,
- › lack of regularity,
- › lack of correct patterns of fulfilling the role of a student in the family and peer environment,
- › difficulties in cooperation between teacher and parent,
- › lack of cooperation with parents,

- › developmental deficits,
- › absenteeism or low attendance of the child/student in kindergarten/school,
- › low resistance to stress,
- › too many children/students in the classroom/group,
- › hypersensitivity,
- › inadequate response to different preschool/school situations,
- › high school demands,
- › slow pace of work,
- › difficulties with adaptation,
- › lack of therapeutic interventions when necessary,
- › low socio-emotional competences,
- › low self-esteem and self-confidence.

In the subsequent part of the evaluations, the teachers surveyed focused on the category of change in the student's/child's functioning as a result of the assistant's work. A favourable result was achieved in the overall evaluation of the degree of perceived change in the daily functioning of the student/child receiving the assistant's support, although only slightly more than half of the teachers surveyed expressed a clearly positive stance in this respect ( $M=4.36$ ;  $SD=0.85$ , definitely good: 131 – 54.4%, rather good: 79 – 32.8%, difficult to say: 19 – 7.9%, rather bad: 11 – 4.6%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

The assessments of the changes carried out varied according to the sphere of student functioning. The teachers surveyed perceived the most beneficial changes in the social and emotional development of the child/student supported by the assistant, and the least positive changes in intellectual development, although the average result obtained is very similar to the results obtained within two other areas: physical development and school knowledge and skills. The detailed results are as follows:

- › changes in intellectual development ( $M=3.92$ ;  $SD=0.96$ , definitely good: 79 – 32.8%, rather good: 95 – 39.4%, difficult to say: 46 – 19.1%, rather bad: 17 – 7.1%, definitely bad: 4 – 1.7%);
- › changes in physical development ( $M=3.96$ ;  $SD=0.81$ , definitely good: 87 – 36.1%, rather good: 85 – 35.3%, difficult to say: 49 – 20.3%, rather bad: 12 – 5.0%, definitely bad: 8 – 3.3%);



- › changes in knowledge/skills at school (M=3.98; SD=0.99, definitely good: 85 – 35.3%, rather good: 90 – 37.3%, difficult to say: 45 – 18.7%, rather bad: 17 – 7.1%, definitely bad: 4 – 1.7%);
- › changes in social and emotional development (M=4.22; SD=0.82, definitely good: 113 – 46.9%, rather good: 84 – 34.9%, difficult to say: 29 – 12.0%, rather bad: 13 – 5.4%, definitely bad: 2 – 0.8%).

Moreover, the surveyed teachers indicated that the presence of the assistant positively affected group/classroom relationships (M=4.34; SD=0.81, definitely good: 122 – 50.6%, rather good: 91 – 37.8%, difficult to say: 19 – 7.9%, rather bad: 7 – 2.9%, definitely bad: 2 – 0.8%). The results for the indicated changes in each relational area in the group/class are shown in Table 20.

**Table 20.** Changes in relational areas in the group/class of children/students resulting from the presence of the assistant in the opinion of the teachers surveyed

Relationship areas	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
Respect for the rules and norms of the kindergarten/school	4,24	0,94
Respect for others	4,32	0,88
Attends kindergarten/school regularly	4,23	1,03
Initiates various tasks for the kindergarten/school and the group/class	3,78	1,17
Active, helpful, willing to help others	4,10	1,04
Pursues his/her passions and interests	4,06	1,03
Maintains contact with peers	4,15	0,96
Establishes contact with peers	4,13	0,99
Respects peers	4,10	1,99
Is able to help when necessary	4,04	0,93
Gets accepted by peers	4,39	0,78
Can cooperate with others	4,02	0,92

Relationship areas	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
Acts as a positive role model for others	3,71	1,13
Has colleagues and friends	4,06	1,00
Does not give in to peer pressure and has personal opinions	3,81	1,08

Source: own study.

The teachers found the greatest changes brought about by the assistant's presence in children's lives in terms of peer acceptance and the child's/student's respect for others. On the other hand, the smallest changes were reported in the case of the child/student being a positive role model for others, initiating various tasks for the benefit of the group/class and the kindergarten/school and having his/her own opinion and not yielding to peer pressure. Complementing the information provided herein, it needs to be added that, in the opinion of the teachers surveyed, the children/students were very satisfied with the presence of the assistant ( $M=4.74$ ;  $SD=0.62$ , definitely good: 192 – 79.7%, rather good: 31 – 12.9%, difficult to say: 13 – 5.4%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

Continuing with the evaluation process, the teachers in the study made an evaluation in the context of the assistant's cooperation with teachers, which they rated very highly ( $M=4.75$ ;  $SD=0.63$ , definitely good: 199 – 82.6%, rather good: 30 – 12.4%, difficult to say: 7 – 2.9%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%). They expressed an even more positive assessment with regard to the assistant's commitment to the work ( $M=4.79$ ;  $SD=0.62$ , definitely good: 210 – 87.1%, rather good: 18 – 7.5%, difficult to say: 8 – 3.3%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 1 – 0.4%).

The previously presented results correspond with the assessment of the achievement of the objective and assumptions of the project, i.e. the preparation of the assistant to work with a child/student with SEN ( $M=4.62$ ;  $SD=0.71$ , definitely good: 182 – 75.5%, rather good: 40 – 16.6%, difficult to say: 9 – 3.7%, rather bad: 6 – 2.5%, definitely bad: 4 – 1.7%). In addition, with the fulfilment of expectations from the assistant's job ( $M=4.67$ ;

SD=0.79, definitely good: 194 – 80.5%, rather good: 26 – 10.8%, difficult to say: 13 – 5.4%, rather bad: 4 – 1.7%, definitely bad: 4 – 1.7%).

### Opinion of parents

Parents also made an assessment of the changes to their child's quality of functioning as a result of the assistant's support. The parents surveyed evaluated the development of their child's competence compared to peers using the 5-point scale, where 1 means very bad compared to peers and 5 means very good compared to peers (Table 21).

**Table 21.** Child's development/competence as compared to peers in the opinion of the parents surveyed

Development/competence of the child	M (mean)	SD (standard deviation)
manual dexterity	3,58	1,04
general motor skills (e.g. movement)	3,78	1,11
pace of learning	2,90	1,07
speech	3,25	1,22
memory	3,47	1,14
ability to concentrate (focus)	2,41	1,13
social development – interaction with peers	2,80	1,08
social development – interaction with adults	3,41	1,17
self-care, independence	3,36	1,22

Source: own study.

When comparing their child with peers, the parents rated their child's general motor skills (movement), hand dexterity, and memory the highest. In contrast, they rated their child's ability to focus (attention span), social development, including interaction with peers, and learning pace significantly lower. The parents surveyed also reviewed the improvement

in their child's functioning in different areas of functioning as a result of the assistant's supportive interventions. An evaluation questionnaire was completed by 233 parents in this respect. Table 22 summarises the results.

**Table 22.** Improvement in the child's functioning in specific areas as a result of the assistant's work in the opinion of the parents surveyed

Areas of development	Definitely not		Rather not		No opinion		Rather yes		Definitely yes		Not applicable	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
manual dexterity	2	0,9	9	3,9	22	9,4	77	33,0	66	27,9	57	24,5
general motor skills (e.g. movement)	2	0,9	9	3,9	22	9,4	81	34,9	56	24,0	62	26,6
pace of learning	3	1,3	18	7,7	44	18,9	92	39,5	57	24,5	17	7,3
speech	5	2,1	15	6,4	25	10,7	91	39,1	60	25,8	35	15,0
memory	1	0,4	18	7,7	42	18,0	98	42,1	52	22,3	20	8,6
ability to concentrate (focus)	2	0,9	23	9,9	37	15,9	101	43,3	69	29,6	0	0
social development – interaction with peers	4	1,7	11	4,7	23	9,9	81	34,8	113	48,5	0	0
social development – interaction with adults	2	0,9	9	3,9	21	9,0	77	33,0	110	47,2	12	5,2
school skills (reading, writing)	8	3,4	20	8,6	34	14,6	71	30,5	53	22,7	45	19,3
school skills (mathematics)	9	3,9	23	9,9	32	13,7	67	28,8	54	23,2	46	19,7
self-care, independence	5	2,1	18	7,7	13	5,8	86	36,9	87	37,3	22	9,4

Source: own study.

As indicated by the data obtained, the parents interviewed were decidedly positive (more than 80% of indications) about the existence of positive changes induced by the assistant's work in the area of the child's social development – contact with peers and interaction with adults. It should be

noted that in all evaluated areas of the child's functioning, the majority of parents surveyed reported improvements as a result of the assistant's work.

A significant number of respondents emphasised positive changes in the area of self-care and child independence. Parents saw the least improvement in the area of school competences: writing, reading and mathematics.

Parents further indicated their child's degree of satisfaction with being supported by an assistant, using the 1–5 scale, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 5 means very satisfied. The result showed a high satisfaction of children with the assistant's support ( $M=4.72$ ;  $SD=0.67$ ).

The parents surveyed also answered the question of whether they should participate in the recruitment of an assistant for their child. The majority of parents were undecided on that matter (163 – 70.0%), 59 (25.3%) were in favour of parental participation, and 11 (4.7%) were against it.

They furthermore formulated some comments on the project. Among the most frequently mentioned are:

- › it is a pilot study, it should be continued;
- › satisfaction that the child has been included in the project and in the activities of the assistant;
- › insufficient number of working hours of the assistant;
- › a suggestion to recruit students each year to be offered assistant support;
- › a request that every child with special educational needs should have an assistant;
- › the need to clearly define the assistant's scope of work;
- › recognition that the project is too short and should last a full year.

## Chapter 3. Qualitative research

### 3.1. Research assumptions

#### 3.1.1. Research objective and research problems

The objective of this part of the study was to explore SENAs' work experience from five different perspectives: those of SENAs, teachers working with SENAs, principals employing SENAs, students receiving SENAs' support, and the parents. The research problems centred around the five areas of the "Special educational needs teaching assistant" project:

1. recruiting the assistants;
2. preparation of assistants for work (training);
3. competences and tasks of the assistant;
4. the benefits of the assistant's work;
5. difficulties related to the assistant's work.

#### 3.1.2. Research methodology

Achieving the set objective required a qualitative approach rooted in an interpretive paradigm (Husserl, 1989; Malewski, 1998). Interpretive phenomenology was used, in which the researcher's object of interest is not the pursuit of a single truth or pattern but the everyday, real-life experience of a particular phenomenon (Parahoo, 2014), which in this case was the work of an assistant to a child/student with special educational needs. The assumption here is that the researcher can take an active role in explaining and interpreting the events, objects, and people he or she encounters in

his or her life (Neubauer, Witkop, Varpio, 2019). The researcher's interest, in this case, concentrates on how the meanings given to phenomena are generated and transformed, which requires the investigator to be open and ready to accept unexpected meanings that may arise (Giorgi, 2010). Focus interviews were chosen as the method of data collection here (Barbour, 2011). As Uwe Flick writes (Barbour, 2011, p. 17): "Focus studies are often used as a stand-alone method, but in many cases they are part of projects that rely on a range of other qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods. They are also perceived as a valid alternative to individual interviews that form the database for qualitative analysis." The use of focus group interviews allowed the claims and accounts of the people interviewed to be analysed regarding their experiences and the events in which they participated and revealed the interactional context of the situation. Focus interviews (focus group interviews) are considered to provide insights into the needs of interviewees, their attitudes and shared values (Banaszak 2017). The intention was originally to conduct the interviews in a traditional format. Due to the sanitary rigours of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), this part of the research was designed to be carried out online, which was conducive not only to maintaining health security but also to saving time and money. This form of research reduces the costs of "data collection, coding, recruiting respondents, travel or renting premises" (Batorski, Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006, p.104), and also allows the research to be conducted in an environment that is friendly to the participants to the study, connecting with the researchers from their homes or the facilities where they work/study.

The data collected during the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, which proceeded according to the following sequence: (1) reviewing the collected data, (2) conducting data coding, (3) pre-generating themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) compiling the final report (Braun, Clarke, 2022).

The focus interviews allowed for the inclusion of those participants who can share their experiences of working with SENA in order to support a child/student with special educational needs. Making reference during the study to situations/experiences that occurred prior to the interview creates an opportunity to obtain data relevant to the research question. All

the project participants were invited to the interviews: principals, teachers, SENAs, and parents, and there was also an attempt to interview the students assisted by SENAs. The focus interviews made it possible to analyse the discussion initiated by the facilitators and continued by the research participants, while the information obtained provided an insight into the needs of the interviewees, their motivations, behaviours, attitudes and values they held (Lisek-Michalska, 2015).

### 3.1.3. Research procedure

Given the assumption of completely voluntary participation in the interviews, various channels were used to reach potential candidates, who were recruited from five groups: special educational needs teaching assistants (SENA), principals/vice principals of schools with employed SENA, teachers cooperating with SENA, parents of students/children receiving SENA's support and students/children themselves. Recruitment for the study made use of the platform created for the project, contact by email, telephone and Google forms. In September 2022, an announcement was posted on the platform for the users (each of the groups mentioned), and emails were sent to those participating in the project (individual messages to all people in each of the groups mentioned), informing them of the planned form (online, via ZOOM platform) and the approximate duration (approximately 1–2 hours) of the group interviews. It was also communicated that the interviews would be recorded and that the results obtained this way would be used for research purposes, and anonymity was guaranteed (personal data, the name of the school and the town were not disclosed in the report). In accordance with the previously adopted assumptions, it was also ensured that each person who takes part in such an interview will receive a thank-you gift in the form of a voucher worth PLN 100.

Focus interviews were conducted synchronously with each group. Potential candidates were able to pick an available interview date and a convenient time to participate (out of three options for each group) by filling in a Google form. The form included questions about the general personal details of the potential candidates (e.g. age, gender, place of residence –



without specifying the name of the town, class and educational stage of the SEN child, time working as a SENA/time working with a SENA, type of SEN and others), as well as contact details (email address, phone number – to confirm the person’s eligibility for the interview) along with a statement of consent to participate in the study.

Each interview was conducted by two researchers, one of whom served as the lead and the other as the facilitator. The ZOOM Platform was used for this purpose, with three cases requiring the use of Microsoft Teams. Each person participating in the study consented to the interview, its recording, transcription and publication of interview excerpts relevant to the analysis (despite being included in the application form, the question was asked again at the beginning of each interview). In the case of the students/children under study, such consent was also given by parents who were present during the interviews. Research ethics were observed during the interviews. The researchers undertook keeping the personal data confidential, as well as using the results of the analyses for research purposes only. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and the subsequent use of the material obtained.

Below, is a description of the procedure for the interviews in each of the study groups.

Between November 2022 and April 2023, a total of four focus interviews were conducted with the **principals** of establishments where an assistant for students with special educational needs was employed. Those who took part in the study (women alone) responded to an email invitation sent to all principals whose establishments were involved in the project. Originally, three interviews were scheduled with 10 principals who agreed to participate in the qualitative study. Eventually, fewer people logged in: focus I – 7, focus II – 8, focus III – 6. A fourth, additional focus was conducted in April 2023. Again, invitations were sent by email to principals who had initially agreed to participate in the qualitative research back in November, but did not participate at that time for various reasons (not always reported). Four women participated in this interview. The interviews lasted between 1h 10min and 1h 42min, were recorded (the subjects gave their consent, were informed about the rules of the study,

its objectives and the anonymisation of the data) and subsequently transcribed. First, the principals introduced their institutions, the children assisted by SENAs and gave background information on the assistants they employed. They then gave their answers to three general questions (representing a certain disposition, but modified and extended when the situation called for it). The questions were:

- › Has the presence of a SENA affected the work of your institution, the functioning of students and teachers – if so, how? Has anything changed? What?
- › What would you need to pay attention to in the future when employing a SENA? What competencies should s/he have?
- › What are the biggest advantages of the SENA project and what are the key problems/disadvantages?

Between November 2022 and February 2023, four online focus interviews were conducted with **teachers**. The meetings were conducted using Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The interviews were managed by two researchers, one serving as the lead and the other as the facilitator. Teachers working with a special educational needs teaching assistant were sent an email inviting them to contribute to the study. Of those approached, 10 participants were invited to the meeting. Eventually, fewer people joined the session: in the first focus group, there were four people, in the second group – six people, in the third group – five people, in the fourth group – nine people.

On average, the interviews lasted 1.5 hours and all were recorded (upon consent of the research participants) in order to be transcribed afterwards. Participants were informed of the objectives of the study. Each interview featured questions designed to match the interview disposition:

1. Tell us about yourself – introduce yourself, what subject do you teach? What school/institution/kindergarden do you work at? What level of education is it? Have you had any education or training in working with SEN students?
2. Tell us about the SEN student supported by the assistant – age, difficulties experienced.
3. Tell us about the work of the assistant – what does it consist of/ what does s/he do? How long has the assistant been supporting the

- student? How helpful is s/he? How do you evaluate the effects of the assistant's work? Is s/he prepared for this kind of work?
4. Please tell us about your cooperation with the SEN student's assistant – how do you involve the assistant in your work? Are there problems with cooperation? What fosters cooperation?
  5. What could be improved in the employment process and work of SENA (the way of collaboration, training, and recruitment of SENA/students...?)

When it comes to the group of **assistants (SENA)**, a decision was made before the commencement of the study to send out an e-mail to all participating institutions informing them of the group interviews to be held and the address where assistants could register their willingness to participate. Forty-five applications were received, out of which 30 were selected, and individual messages were mailed back confirming eligibility for the interview along with other necessary organisational requirements. Three interviews were originally scheduled, with ten participants expected to take part in each. A few days before the interview, the researchers contacted the participants again via email and text messages (sms) detailing how to log in to the scheduled meeting. Qualified individuals had previously confirmed their readiness to attend the meeting; however, when the day came, fewer people logged in (for a variety of reasons): focus I – 8, focus II – 7, focus III – 9. In April 2023, it was decided to conduct a fourth, additional focus interview. Recruitment relied on previous submissions, adopting an identical method of notifying qualified participants. Ultimately, seven people took part in the fourth interview. It is worth noting that the willingness to participate in the focus interviews was declared primarily by women. Only one man submitted an application. Four online focus interviews were conducted with special educational needs teaching assistants (SENA) using Zoom and Microsoft Teams platforms. Each interview was conducted by two researchers, one acting as the lead and the other overseeing the organisational aspects of the meetings. In total, all the focus interviews conducted were dominated by female assistants, with a total of 30 and only one male assistant.

Interviews lasted between 1 hour and 10 minutes and two hours. At the beginning of the interview, the respondents were asked to introduce

themselves and the child/student they were assisting. Three questions were formulated to provide somewhat of a disposition to the interview:

1. What is your experience of working as a SENA? What does your work involve?
2. What experiences do you have of working with teachers, parents and students? What are the key challenges in this cooperation, and what goes without difficulty?
3. How do you evaluate the training and preparation for your work as a SENA? Would you change anything in your training and work? And if so, what?

Three online focus interviews were also conducted with **parents** of children who had received support from a special educational needs assistant (between November 2022 and December 2022). Zoom platform was used for the meetings. Interviews were conducted by two researchers, one acting as the lead and the other as the facilitator. Those who participated in the study (only women/mothers) replied to the email invitation sent to parents whose children participated in the project. Three interviews were scheduled, with 12 people attending.

On average, the interviews lasted 1.5 hours. Those participating in the interviews were informed of the objectives of the study and expressed their consent to the session recording. After the interview had been completed, it was transcribed. First, the mothers interviewed introduced their children receiving SENA support and described how they function, and then each interview featured questions structured to match the interview disposition:

1. Please tell us why you decided to use the assistant's help and how you evaluate this help.
2. How has the presence of the assistant affected your child's competences/skills/relationship with peers?
3. Please indicate the most important qualities and skills of a good assistant.
4. Do you think the assistant is well prepared for the job? Have there been any situations when the assistant did not succeed?
5. How do you feel knowing that the child receives support from the assistant?

6. Do you feel that a parent should be involved in the recruitment process for the assistant? Are you ladies satisfied with the assistant recruitment process?

As far as the **children**/students assisted were concerned, the interview process was initially planned to be group-based. However, only five children were enlisted for interviews by their parents and in each case, the parents preferred an individual interview where they could support their child with answers or clarify any ambiguities.

The online interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. It needs to be stressed that participating in the online interview seemed to be a challenging experience for some of the children. Despite the timing being tailored to the needs of both a parent and a child, it was often difficult to concentrate on the questions. Children were occasionally distracted, and some of their answers required explanation from parents – due to the researcher’s unfamiliarity with the context. This is illustrated by the following extract from the interview with U2:

B: What is this Auntie Annie like? [the girl calls the assistant in this way]

U2 turns away, smiles, looks at her mother, remains silent for a while.

U2’s parent: What does she look like? What kind of hair does she have?

U2: Yellow.

U2’s parent: Yes, she has yellow hair. Well done [child’s name].

B: And does she play with you?

U2 nods.

B: And what else does she do?

U2: A green blouse.

U2’s parent: Yes, Auntie Annie has been wearing a green blouse today.

B: Well done [child’s name], you are very observant. And what else does Auntie Annie do?

U2 falls silent, she wants to get up. Mum gently stops her.

U2’s parent: Tell me, where did you two go last time?

U2: With Eliza.

U2's parent: Tell me, where did you go?

B: Oh, there was a trip! Who went on it?

U2: Eliza, Basia, Kasia.

B: And what did you do there?

U2: Bread eating. And crisps. And lots of water.

U2's parent: It was the first time she travelled by bus by herself. Before that, we'd always try to go with her.

B: Great. It's an important event. Was Auntie Annie also on the trip?

U2: She nods in agreement.

B: What did you do together?

U2's parent: Tell us about it. Did Auntie Annie hold your hand?

U2: Yes. She carried in arms. Then not – her arm hurt. And Maja.

B: Auntie looks after other children too?

U2 falls silent, walks away from the computer for a while.

U2's parent: No, Maja just had to walk up, and Auntie said her arm hurt. She couldn't carry Maja. Because [U2's name] is such a little thing (she weighs less than 15 kg), and when they even walk somewhere, I can see them carrying her. They treat her a little bit like a little baby.

The above excerpt demonstrates the difficulty in both receiving and communicating information to some of the children. In doing so, it was necessary to protect their well-being and avoid pressure to provide answers. Indeed, it was considered ethical not only for the parent to give consent to the study, but also for the children themselves. Unfortunately, the interview conducted online meant that there were limited resources available to establish a positive relationship with the child (e.g. through fun activities, the use of objects that might be of interest to the child, extended time to talk freely with the child).

The results of the study were transcribed and the collected material was subsequently analysed: thematic coding and categorisation (Gibbs, 2011).

### 3.2. Description of the study groups

#### 3.2.1. Principals

Twenty-five female principals from kindergardens, primary schools and one secondary school participated in the focus interviews. Although two men had originally come forward, neither attended the interview.

Information containing basic data on female principals who were interviewed is presented in Table 23.

**Table 23.** Data on the interviewed group of principals

Person interviewed	Age	Type of locality	Province (Voivodship)	Type of establishment	Number of SENAs in the establishment
D1F1	52	village	małopolskie	primary school	1
D2F1	54	city >100K	małopolskie	primary school	3
D3F1	54	town <50K	podkarpackie	primary school	1
D4F1	43	town <50K	dolnośląskie	kindergarden	2
D5F1	45	city >100K	mazowieckie	kindergarden	1
D6F1	50	town <50K	podkarpackie	kindergarden	2
D7F1	63	town <50K	śląskie	kindergarden	2
D8F2	50	village	kujawsko-pomorskie	primary school	4
D9F2	63	town <50K	dolnośląskie	primary school	1

Person interviewed	Age	Type of locality	Province (Voivodship)	Type of establishment	Number of SENAs in the establishment
D10F2	42	village	lubelskie	primary school	1
D11F2	49	town <50K	pomorskie	primary school	1
D12F2	45	city >100K	śląskie	kindergarden	2
D13F2	57	city >100K	podkarpackie	primary school	5
D14F2	59	city >100K	podkarpackie	school and preschool complex	5
D15F2	45	village	śląskie	primary school	1
D16F3	52	village	lubelskie	primary school	1
D17F3	53	village	kujawsko-pomorskie	primary school	2
D18F3	56	town <50K	świętokrzyskie	primary school	2
D19F3	50	village	pomorskie	primary school	1
D20F3	46	village	małopolskie	educational centre group	1
D21F3	52	city >50K <100K	śląskie	vocational school	2
D22F4	52	town <50K	warmińsko-mazurskie	kindergarden	2
D23F4	44	town <50K	łódzkie	primary school	2
D24F4	70	village	pomorskie	kindergarden	1
D25F4	48	town <50K	dolnośląskie	primary school	5

Source: own study.



The age of the women surveyed ranged from 42 to 70, with a mean age of 51.8. Most female directors (10) worked in establishments located in towns with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants and in villages (9). 5 worked in institutions in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and only one in a city with more than 50,000 but below 100,000 inhabitants. The establishments were located in eleven provinces, and the most represented provinces were podkarpackie and śląskie (4 people each), then małopolskie, dolnośląskie and pomorskie (3 people each). Principals from zachodnio-pomorskie, wielkopolskie, podlaskie, lubuskie and opolskie provinces did not participate in the interview (did not apply). The most numerous representatives (15 persons) were principals of primary schools and kindergardens (7 persons). In addition, there were single individuals working in a school and preschool complex, a vocational school and an educational centre group. The latter two units operated as secondary schools.

### 3.2.2. Teachers

Twenty-four teachers cooperating with SENAs took part in the study. Detailed demographic data are provided in Table 24.

**Table 24.** Data collected on the surveyed group of teachers

Participant	Age	Gender	Place of residence	Type of establishment	Professional rank
N1F1	35	F	city 20–100K	PS (grades 1–3)	appointed teacher
N2F1	57	F	city 20–100K	PS (grades 4–8)	chartered teacher
N3F1	31	F	village	Preschool unit	appointed teacher
N4F1	46	F	village	PS (grades 1–3)	chartered teacher
N1F2	51	F	village	Preschool unit	novice teacher

Participant	Age	Gender	Place of residence	Type of establishment	Professional rank
N2F2	37	F	town <20K	Preschool unit	appointed teacher
N3F2	59	F	city 20–100K	Preschool unit	chartered teacher
N4F2	62	F	village	Preschool unit	chartered teacher
N5F2	28	F	village	Preschool unit	appointed teacher
N6F2	57	F	village	Preschool unit	chartered teacher
N1F3	34	F	city 20–100K	PS (grades 4–8)	appointed teacher
N2F3	43	F	village	PS (grades 4–8)	chartered teacher
N3F3	58	F	city 20–100K	PS (grades 4–8)	chartered teacher
N4F3	39	M	city 20–100K	PS (grades 4–8)	appointed teacher
N5F3	59	F	town <20K	PS (grades 4–8)	chartered teacher
N1F4	57	F	city 20–100K	PS (grades 1–3)	chartered teacher
N2F4	55	F	village	PS (grades 1–3)	chartered teacher
N3F4	48	F	city >100K	PS (grades 1–3)	chartered teacher
N4F4	59	F	town <20K	PS (grades 1–3)	chartered teacher
N5F4	38	F	village	PS (grades 4–8)	chartered teacher
N6F4	40	F	city >100K	PS (grades 4–8)	appointed teacher

Participant	Age	Gender	Place of residence	Type of establishment	Professional rank
N7F4	44	F	village	Stage I sectoral vocational school	chartered teacher
N8F4	33	F	village	Preschool unit	appointed teacher
N9F4	46	F	town <20K	Stage I sectoral vocational school, vocational school	chartered teacher

Source: own study.

Twenty-three women and one man, all aged 28–59, participated in the interviews (mean age 46.5). Almost half of the respondents live in rural areas (46%), and in cities of 20K-100K inhabitants (33%), 13% live in small towns, while 8% live in large cities. The teachers represented different types of schools and educational levels. Preschool units and level 2 primary schools employed 33.5% of the respondents, level 1 primary schools – 25% of the respondents, and secondary schools 8%. Accordingly, primary schools had the largest representation of teachers. These were teachers with longer seniority, so the majority (62%) were chartered or appointed teachers (34%). Only one teacher (4%) was a novice teacher. Teachers' statements indicate that the difficulties of children/students supported by the assistant resulted from motor disabilities (e.g. muscular dystrophy), intellectual disabilities, aphasia and other communication problems, autism spectrum disorder, social maladjustment (behavioural disorders), psychomotor hyperactivity, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment.

### 3.2.3. Special educational needs teaching assistants (SENAs)

A total of 31 assistants took part in the study. Background information on the assistants interviewed is presented in Table 25.

**Table 25.** Assistants participating in focus interviews – demographic data

SENA No./Focus interview No.	Age	Gender	Type of locality	Employment in SENA project	Type of establishment/grade	Amount of working time	Gender of the child/student	Type of disability/SEN of the student receiving assistance
A1F1	24	F	city 20–100K	September 2022	primary school-grade IV	3/4	M	intellectual disability autism spectrum disorders
A2F1	31	KF	Town to 20K	September 2022	primary school-grade II	3/4	M	oppositional and rebellious behaviour
A3F1	54	F	city 20–100K	April 2022	Preschool unit	3/4	M	impaired mobility
A4F1	21	F	city 20–100K	September 2022	primary school-grade VII	7/8	M	behavioural difficulties difficulties in learning
A5F1	40	F	city 20–100K	September 2022	primary school-grade II	1/2	M	aphasia
A6F1	22	F	city >100K	September 2022	primary school-grade I	1	M	chronic condition aphasia
A7F1	25	F	city 20–100K	September 2022	secondary school-grade I	3/4	M	autism spectrum disorders
A8F1	40	F	village	July 2022	primary school-grade VII	1	M	hearing impairment and autism spectrum disorders
A9F2	32	F	city >100K	September 2022	primary school-grade IV	1	M	autism spectrum disorders
A10F2	25	F	village	September 2022	primary school-grade III	1	M	social maladjustment
A11F2	25	F	Town to 20K	August 2022	preschool unit	6/8	F	autism spectrum disorders

SENA No./Focus interview No.	Age	Gender	Type of locality	Employment in SENA project	Type of establishment/grade	Amount of working time	Gender of the child/student	Type of disability/SEN of the student receiving assistance
A12F2	48	F	Town to 20K	September 2022	primary school-grade III	3/4	F	intellectual disability
A13F2	51	F	village	September 2022	primary school-grade IV	1/2	F	intellectual disability(mild degree)chronic condition
A14F2	31	F	city 20–100K	November 2022	primary school-grade IV	1	F	chronic condition
A15F2	33	F	village	April 2022	preschool unit	3/4	F	autism spectrum disorders
A16F3	39	F	village	November 2022	preschool unit	5/8	F	impaired mobility
A17F3	24	F	village	October2022	primary school-grade II	7/8	M	autism spectrum disorders
A18F3	40	F	Town to 20K	July2022	primary school-grade III	3/4	F	autism spectrum disorders
A19F3	45	F	village	May2022	primary school-grade I	3/4	F	multiple disabilities
A20F3	23	F	village	April 2022	primary school-grade III	3/4	M	autism spectrum disorders
A21F3	29	F	village	November 2022	Preschool unit	3/4	M	autism spectrum disorders
A22F3	40	F	village	August 2022	primary school-grade III	3/4	M	intellectual disabilityDown syndrome
A23F3	47	F	city 20–100K	September 2022	Stage I sectoral vocational school	1/2	M	intellectual disability (moderate level)

SENA No./Focus interview No.	Age	Gender	Type of locality	Employment in SENA project	Type of establishment/grade	Amount of working time	Gender of the child/student	Type of disability/SEN of the student receiving assistance
A24F3	27	F	village	September 2022	preschool unit	3/4	F	impaired mobility aphasia
A25F4	27	F	Town to 20K	September 2022	preschool unit	1	M	autism spectrum disorders
A26F4	44	F	city 20–100K	November 2022	primary school-grade V	3/4 7 godzin w tyg.	F	intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, no speech
A27F4	21	F	village	September 2022	Preschool unit	1	M	FAS
A28F4	51	F	village	March2022	Preschool unit	1	F	Down syndrome
A29F4	30	F	village	March2022	primary school-grade V	¾	M	intellectual disability
A30F4	33	F	village	March2022	primary school-grade I	3/4 0.75	F	Hearing impairment
A31F4	41	F	city 20–100K	March2022	primary school-grade III	1	M	Hearing impairment

Source: own study.

The respondents' age ranged from 21 to 51, with the mean age being 34.29. Most of the assistants surveyed worked in establishments located in rural areas (15 people). Nine people worked in institutions located in cities with 20 to 100K inhabitants, five people in smaller towns with up to 20K inhabitants and only two assistants in a city with over 100K inhabitants. In the majority of cases, those interviewed had been providing support to children/students since September 2022. The surveyed assistants gained employment within the project at different hourly capacities, but usually, it was ¾ FTE. Students who received support from the assistants usually attended primary

schools, with 10 attending the first educational stage and 8 attending the second educational stage. Nine children attending preschool units were also provided with assistance. It is worth noting that two assistants supporting two students from secondary schools participated in the group interviews. Children/students with different educational needs were recommended for the project; however, in the surveys conducted, it was mostly children/students with autism spectrum disorders who were covered by support.

### 3.2.4. Parents

Ten people took part in the study and all of them expressed their consent to participate in the qualitative study.

Information containing basic data about the parents under study and the children supported by the assistant is presented in Table 25.

**Table 26.** Data on the group of parents and their children who participated in the study

Person interviewed	Age of person interviewed	Type of locality	Duration of the assistant's support	Type of establishment where the child is supported by the assistant	Age of child receiving assistance	Type of difficulty/special educational needs experienced by the child
R1F1	37	city >20K	4 months	preschool unit	6	intellectual disability hearing impairment prematurity (endocrinological problems)
R2F1	45	village	3 months	primary school – VI grade	15	impaired mobility intellectual disability hearing impairment (profound hearing loss) visual impairment (optic nerve atrophy) autism spectrum disorders epilepsy Angelman syndrome Rett syndrome

Person interviewed	Age of person interviewed	Type of locality	Duration of the assistant's support	Type of establishment where the child is supported by the assistant	Age of child receiving assistance	Type of difficulty/ special educational needs experienced by the child
R3F1	37	city <100K	3 months	primary school – V grade	11	autism spectrum disorders ADHD
R4F2	43	city >20K	6 months	primary school – II grade	8	impaired disability (muscular flaccidity)
R5F2	31	village	2 months	preschool unit	6	aphasia
R6F2	43	city >100K	a month	primary school – V grade	13	autism spectrum disorders moderate intellectual disability communicates with MÓWik – a speech synthesis application
R7F2	36	village	9 months	primary school – I grade (deferred)	8	impaired mobility
R8F3	36	city >100K	6 months	primary school– V grade	11	impaired mobility (walks around the school with a walker)
R9F3	42	village	a month	Preschool unit	3	hearing impairment, speech problems
R10F3	45	city <100K	3 months	primary school– II grade	8	autism spectrum disorders

Source: own study.

The age of interviewed women ranged from 31–45, with a mean age of 39.5. Some of the interviewed women live in rural areas (40%), in towns with up to 20K inhabitants (20%), in cities with up to 100K inhabitants (20%), and in cities with more than 100K inhabitants (20%). The children receiving the assistant's support were between 3 and 15 years old: three years old (10%), six years old (20%), eight years old (30%), 11 years old (20%), 13 years old (10%), 15 years old (10%) and attended preschool units (30%) and primary schools (70%), where one child was in grade I, two children



were in grade II, three children were in grade V and one child was in grade VI. The duration of the assistance: over a month (20%), two months (10%), three months (30%), four months (10%) and six months (20%). According to the mothers, the difficulties experienced by the children that were under the assistant's care resulted from impaired mobility, intellectual disability, aphasia and other communication problems, autism spectrum disorder, psychomotor hyperactivity, genetic diseases, and hearing and sight impairment.

### 3.2.5. Students – children with special educational needs

Five students – children with SEN – took part in the study. The children studied were aged 6 (2 individuals), 8 (2 individuals) and 11 (1 individual). The group consisted of three girls and two boys.

Table 26 provides their detailed characteristics.

**Table 27.** Information on the study group

Person interviewed	Age	Gender	Type of disability/SEN	Type of establishment	Grade	Duration of SENA's support	Place of residence
U1	8	K	impaired mobility	primary school	II	4 years	town to 20K
U2	6	K	intellectual disability, hearing impairment, prematurity, endocrinological problems	kindergarden	Group of 5-year-olds	4 months	town to 20K
U3	6	K	aphasia	preschool unit	Group of 5-year-olds	2 months	village
U4	8	M	autism spectrum disorders	SP	II	3 months	City over 100K
U5	11	M	impaired mobility	SP	II	6 months	city 20–100K

Source: own study.

A parent-mother was present near the child during each interview to encourage the child to respond if necessary. The children interviewed did not require communication support (e.g. alternative communication, sign language interpreter) during the interview, even though they were assured that such an option existed. In one case (U3), the child's parent reported that they would interpret the child's utterances as they might not be understood by a person who does not know the specifics of their daughter's communication. In this particular case, it also proved necessary to repeat the questions to the child, as it was difficult for the girl to understand the words coming from the speakers and to focus.

During the time when the interviews were conducted, all children were benefiting from the support of an assistant within the project in their establishments (school or kindergarden). However, the length of assistance was uneven and ranged from 2 months to 4 years (in the case of U1, the child had been supported by a tutor/teacher before entering the SENA programme).

### 3.3. Findings of the study

#### 3.3.1. Recruitment of assistants and the students in need of teaching assistant support

The recruitment of assistants and children/students in need of support for the project "Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study" followed the specific project criteria. In the recruitment of children/students who needed the support of an assistant, the project envisaged assigning an assistant in a situation where the child/student exhibits difficulties in independent functioning in the institution – school/preschool (in mobility, hygiene, organisation of learning), in communication, resulting from low social competences; presents aggressive and/or self-aggressive behaviours and hinders other children/students in the preschool/school (intrusions, uncontrolled shouting, other undesirable behaviour, etc.).

The focus group study carried out under the project “Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study” involved interviewing, among others, parents, principals, teachers and assistants. The study groups had the opportunity to comment, inter alia, on the recruitment of an assistant and the child/student requiring assistance. One of the groups taking part in the focus group study consisted of principals of schools and kindergardens. They were the ones who were supposed to recruit assistants for their establishments. According to the respondents, this was a **challenging process characterised by a high degree of responsibility**. This difficulty is related mainly to the small number of applicants. This limited the principals’ choice of candidates and resulted in the recruitment of people who met the criteria established in the project but who did not meet all the principals’ expectations. This is confirmed by the following statements:

*In part, we were simply stuck with the people who applied. I’m not saying that because of this, we regret the choice of those assistants we now have. However, there is no doubt that this choice was limited. At the moment, the end result is... that we are satisfied with the work of these assistants to varying degrees. (D2F1)*

*Unfortunately, we didn’t have a lot of applications at the recruitment stage. [...] Sometimes, it’s difficult to choose anyone at these interviews, even more so when there aren’t many people. In our case, we had few applications. There wasn’t much to choose from. (D1F1)*

*We had a more limited choice in the subsequent SENA recruitment. (D2F1)*

*I didn’t have the same luxury as the ladies who had people to choose from. (D5F1)*

*Only one of the principals participating in the focus group survey admitted that she had no problems finding applicants for the assistant position:*

*Our recruitment was open, i.e. it involved placing a call for applications on the school website. [...] And we managed to recruit five people without any major problems. (D25F4).*

When analysing the statements of the respondents, it can be concluded that the reason for the low number of applications for the position of assistant was **procedural considerations**. They failed to guarantee the commencement of the project and consequently prolonged the waiting time for the recruitment of assistants. These difficulties caused some of the recruiters to resign:

*The problem with the recruitment was that the team completely changed during this long process: from the preparation of the application to the signing of the agreement and the physical possibility of introducing the assistant candidates for training. We spent a lot of time on this recruitment. It was linked to some form of selection, selection among those who applied. Unfortunately, because of the long period of time between autumn that year and June this year, some of these people... well, practically all of them withdrew, resigned. This period of waiting for employment was too long for them. (D2F1)*

*[...] That's why we had to complete, resume and repeat this recruitment. And, unfortunately, we were not in such a convenient situation at the time to choose better. In part, we were simply stuck with the people who applied. (D2F1)*

*In my opinion, the only discomfort here is that when we applied for the project, the timing was supposed to be a bit different than what turned out afterwards and for a long time, I didn't do any recruitment. I didn't even give any illusory prospects to anyone. I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't know if the project was going to happen at all. (D12F2)*

*[...] so here, time certainly worked against us, [...]. (D12F2)*

As stressed by the interviewed principals, another reason for the low number of applicants for the recruited position could have been the unattractive employment conditions, i.e. a 10-month part-time employment. This is corroborated by some of the respondents:

*In our case, the proposed salary for a SENA excluded people with a university degree by design. So, I had somewhat limited opportunities to find*

*a suitable SENA. Of course, I offered the position to my teacher aides, but the 10-month employment period... didn't seem attractive enough. (D5F1)*

*It was extremely hard for me to find a SENA, believe me, it was far from easy. Because what was affecting this was mainly the salary. I have a SENA working part-time and with one child and the other. And I struggled with recruitment, let's make it clear [...] it means every afternoon, five days a week, often Saturdays, yes, and the salary, well, it's really embarrassingly low. (D18F3)*

Despite the difficulties associated with the extended recruitment time for the project and the unfavourable conditions of employment of potential assistants, the principals undertook the task of finding competent people for the position. **Information channels** regarding the prospective candidates varied from the more formal to the less formal, i.e. the so-called 'grapevine communication'. It can be inferred from the statements of the interviewed principals that they became personally involved in finding the right person, which can be confirmed by their words:

*[...] I called her, and she said that, of course, she would be happy to do it. Because she's interested in it herself, what it is all about. And so it happened. (D9F2)*

*And the best way to do that is through the so-called 'word of mouth', so I was asking around at the teachers' meeting if anyone knew anyone who was competent. Not necessarily in terms of education. One of the teachers said she knew a girl who'd helped her neighbour who was confined to a wheelchair after an accident, and she was very empathetic and often went out with them and helped, and we invited her for an interview. And it really worked. Also, it is spread a little bit by word of mouth. (D23F4)*

*We conducted open recruitment, which means placing an announcement on the school website. It was a bit of a contest. [...] But it was also – let's make this clear – a bit of word of mouth and Facebook. (D25F4).*

The analysis of the empirical material confirms that principals were very committed to ensuring that the people recruited were 'vetted', educated,

prepared, and competent to work with children/students with special educational needs. Awareness of the **responsibility** that assistants were expected to bear, motivated principals to seek candidates from among those with whom they had worked previously. These included interns, assistants, teachers and parents/mothers. Choosing the right person was a very challenging matter. The principals paid attention to the candidate's personality, knowledge of the work and the responsibility that comes with the assistant's job. One principal put it as follows: "*It is a very serious decision, to ensure that the establishment has a tangible benefit later on and, above all, the child [...]*" (D1F1). The choices made by the principals were accompanied by the knowledge that the persons they proposed were known to them and had performed their duties impeccably up to that point. According to the principals, this was an advantage and a great help in selecting a suitable candidate:

*The ladies who were to become SENAs had worked with us before. Since we knew that they were going to work for us as assistants, we had already started working together before... so they had the opportunity to get to know the children and the parents in advance. (D4F1)*

*It worked out great for me because this lady who is a SENA at my place is also the mother of a child with autism that I have in the kindergarden. So, by assigning her to an autistic child, I assigned her to something that she knows, that she understands. She is from Ukraine, but she is well-educated. She is a musicologist. She used to teach rhythm classes at university. It's great, I mean, it's really great that I got her. (D5F1)*

*I work with Agnieszka, who's a teaching student. She was at our school for an internship. [...] she is happy to take on this task. Because she herself is generally interested in it, what it's all about. And that's what happened. (D9F2)*

*Ms Sylwia, who is our assistant to help Kacper, had previously worked as a teacher's assistant, she had already worked for two years, so basically her interaction with Kacper and her presence in the classroom had not changed anything significantly. She had already been accepted by the*

*group and by Kacper. She fitted in well there, she cooperated well, and this participation essentially did not change much. (D15F2)*

*This lady came to us two years ago, it wasn't an internship, it was an apprenticeship received from the labour office, so we got to know her over six months, she was very communicative, hard-working and often supported teachers in various activities, even in preschool units. So when we joined this project, this lady immediately came to mind, and since she hadn't found any job, she was available, she was more than happy to take on such a task. If we know this person, it's an asset since we know who we're opting for. (D10F2)*

*And we knew our two ladies beforehand because they were aides and they were on student apprenticeship, so we already knew who we could contact. That helped, too. (D8F2)*

*Firstly, this lady was a teacher's aide and then she was hired for the SENA project. (D20F3)*

*The lady was on an internship with us, referred here by the labour office. In the course of it, she found out that there was recruitment for the SENA programme. (D19F3)*

*Our graduate is SENA, [...] She is a calm, composed, systematic person. There were several people, but we picked her to be an assistant. (D16F3)*

*One of the SENA ladies is our graduate, a young woman of 25. This is her first job. The other lady is fulfilling her dream. She previously worked in different capacity, [...]. (D17F3)*

*These were people who had been volunteering at our establishment and I had the opportunity to see them working, their approach to the children and to us. That's how I got to know them and that's how they got into the project when I wrote the project and the funding was awarded. (D22F4)*

*[...] one of our SENAs is a student who was on an apprenticeship with us and saw the advert, so we sort of got to know her work as an apprentice here. (D23F4)*

*[...] I had a girl who was doing an internship under another EU project, [...] the girl was with us for eight months in total and I felt bad when I had to say goodbye to her, because she showed really great skills, abilities, [...]. (D24F4)*

The focus group study that was conducted among teachers seems to indicate that this group of respondents was against a parent becoming the child's assistant. From the teachers' perspective, choosing parents to be assistants would not be a good solution for the child's development and functioning, as highlighted by their statements:

*Because what would happen is that the parent would do things instead of the child, just like at home. (F1N1)*

*It still depends on what kind of parent it is, but we'd rather not go for it. It would be better if it was someone new. (F1N3)*

*The child needs to get used to these strangers being involved in his or her life. (F1N1)*

*We even see here how the child behaves when he is with us, and the moment mummy comes in, it is completely different from how the children behave and react. (F1N2)*

*Yes, we see that on a trip sometimes. When a parent comes with us, it's the worst. (F1N1)*

Choosing the right person for the assistant's position entailed responsibility on the part of the principals. They wanted the assistant to be able to respond to the needs of the child/student s/he would be assisting. Some respondents stressed that their intuition helped them in their decision "I always follow my own intuition when hiring for this position" (D15F2), but the vast majority of respondents paid attention to **competences, skills and aptitude to work** with a child/student with special educational needs. From the perspective of several months of assistant employment, principals emphasise that their choice was a good one and that they are satisfied with the work of the persons selected so far. This is evidenced by the following statements:



*[...] with those we recruited, we tried to make an optimal assignment to individual children. [...] And indeed, I think we have succeeded. (D2F1)*

*[...] Meanwhile, I was very lucky. [...] It worked out great for me because this lady who is a SENA at my place is also the mother of a child with autism that I have in the kindergarden. So by assigning her to an autistic child, I assigned her to something that she knows, that she understands. She is from Ukraine, but she is well-educated. She is a musicologist. She used to teach rhythm classes at university. It's great, I mean, it's really great that I got her. (D5F1)*

*[...] I have highly empathetic ladies, very interested and committed. (D12F2)*

*I managed to recruit people who are also educated. Like I say, it's not the most important thing – the most important thing is the person, because no matter how much knowledge we have, if a person doesn't like children, nothing will come of it. (D13F2)*

*It is a very serious decision, to ensure that the establishment has tangible benefit later on and, above all, the child. (D1F1)*

*So kudos to these ladies for stepping up and bravely moving forward with these children. (D18F3)*

*She is a calm, composed, systematic person. There were several people, but we picked her to be an assistant. (D16F3)*

*[...] She demonstrated truly great skills, abilities, and also there was this girl in the group who was very isolated, who had problems with communication. And I wanted to help both of them... and it worked out just like that. (D24F4)*

An issue that took some principals by surprise was the **involvement of parents in the recruitment process**. The need for parents to approve the selected person for the assistant position could be perceived by the principals as undermining their competence: “[...] it seemed to me that I, as a principal, would do it better, [...] (D19F3), but in the end, the involvement

of the parents and the child/student proved extremely helpful in selecting a suitable candidate. Knowing their child's needs and having interviewed the candidates, mothers pointed to the person they felt would be best suited to the position of assistant:

*What surprised me a lot, and it was sort of planned in the project as well, is that parents have to give their approval by accepting a SENA. [...] I invited the parents for interviews, there was also a child, which also took me by surprise in your proposal. However, I fulfilled all the conditions that were there and I must say that I was pleasantly surprised at how positively it affected these parents, when they were able to choose, to decide, and I think that here also a kind of intuition or a feeling, an empathy of this person who will take care of their child came into play. It really uplifted this family. It was astonishing. So that's what I'm thankful for, because it really is very hard to do, it requires more from us, and I don't know about you, but it worked for me and the parents sort of felt that they had a say in the choice and they knew who was going to work with their child. (D19F3)*

*She turned up for an interview and the parents chose her. Out of the three candidates, they picked her, and she switched to different work at our school. (D19F3)*

The participation of the mothers in the process of recruiting an assistant also came as a surprise to the mothers themselves. It can be inferred from the survey that some of them felt that the principal was the most competent person to select an assistant who would be able to respond to and take into account the special needs of the child/student in the kindergarden/school. From the perspective of these respondents, the principal and the teachers working with the child/student are in a position to verify the education and the content and methodological background, which they, as mothers, are not necessarily aware of. They rely entirely on the principal and teachers, in whom they place their trust to know that the assistant chosen for their child will be experienced in the needs the child manifests:

*[...] this is why it is the role of the principal to decide on the assistant while ensuring that it is a competent person. (R4F2).*

*I think it should be the school that employs the assistant, because the parent doesn't always know [...], but let's take a parent who, for example, doesn't work at school, then what? Can it be determined only visually whether the assistant's pronunciation is good or not? [...] so what I'm saying, is we can judge someone at a glance, and it's the principal, the teachers who conduct classes, whether it's 1–3, school, kindergarden or grade 0, they have the most experience, and really, well, we shouldn't take their bread, because we can visually, as parents, if we don't even know anything about it, well, we can go and ask 'do you like children?' Well, every single assistant will answer 'yes, I do', right? Do you have a degree? They'll answer, but a teacher or the principal will want to know what kind of degree, right? Do they have any experience, and so on and so forth? I'm saying that I don't think parents should be involved in this recruitment, and in fact, I'm saying that if we send a child to a particular school, it means that we have full trust in the teachers and the school's authorities, and we know that they're going to do everything to make sure that our child develops well and feels safe at school, and we know that they will do everything to make sure that our child develops well, that they feel safe at school, and that every teacher must have a clean criminal record, so that teacher will certainly be vetted, and they have their own ways of doing that, so if a teacher has worked at another school, and so on, they can ask how s/he cooperated with the parents, with the teachers? And so on, so here's what I'm saying: I think the principal and the teachers – sure, but the parents – not really. (R1F1)*

*[...] leave it to the school, just like that, because I think it's good, they select these assistants really well, and I think we should do as the previous mother said, that the school should hire the right people for these assistants, right? (R2F1)*

*[...] I think that here Ms Kasia was chosen because she has experience with a child with hearing impairment, and that she simply copes very well, one – with the hearing aid, two – with speaking, that she always, that he always sees her face, he always sees her mouth, and she knows that this is very important for a deaf and hard of hearing person, so I think that when it comes to these issues, I don't think that my presence here can make any*

*difference in the selection. However, I don't know, if someone has other dysfunctions, well, maybe it requires some questions from the parents, checking, I don't know, the knowledge or experience of the person who would take care of such a child, but I think that in our case, well, there was no need for us to take part in the recruitment of this assistant. (R9F3)*

*I don't know whether we should go there. I don't know how much we can tell after one meeting, right? This person, well, sometimes things don't work out, do they? (R8F3)*

The vast majority of mothers interviewed expressed the belief that their participation in the assistant recruitment process was crucial and that parents should also express their opinion about the person hired to support their child. When recruiting assistant candidates, mothers were guided by their intuition, but they also paid attention to attitude, assessed the relationship between the candidate and the child, and observed how their children reacted to individuals. Mothers were less concerned with the hard skills of those applying to become assistants and were more concerned with the abilities and experience of dealing with situations arising from their children's disabilities or special needs:

*In our case, we had two candidates, thank God I might say, the principal gave me the choice, so I had the opportunity to meet with one and the other, so I can honestly say that we chose the lady who didn't have the papers to work as an assistant, and we chose the lady with the heart, so here there was a meeting beforehand, where she got to know my child well, and here we gave it a shot, that she is the one to stay, so here the heart on the sleeve came out, and not the school or the internship [...]. (R7F2)*

*[...] this cannot be superimposed [...], because as you said here: ok, we have candidates, and one of them is mega-educated, has some experience with children and so on and so forth ok, but we also take into account this heart, erm. In our case, we went for the heart. It was my daughter who chose this lady, [...], so this heart, that she immediately greeted her, got acquainted, introduced herself, it was completely different, and she wants it that way, this lady will be my lady, end of the story, so yes. I'm all for it. We had*

*that opportunity, and I can't imagine it otherwise. Yes. A parent should have some say in this, first of all, before the final decision is made, right? Because it's about our children, not other people's children, right? (R7F2)*

*By all means, this is where the parents should have insight because they have worked with the child since birth in all the other institutions, and they know what it looked like before, so I think such involvement should be there. (R4F2)*

*[...] I, for instance, would prefer to get to know the person who's going to be with my child. I'd like the assistant to see my child, I'd like the child to see the assistant, to spend some time together. I know that it's like the assistant's time, right? And my time and the child's time, but if they're going to be together for, say, a year or half a year, I think it's important. It is true that the assistant has some education, but I also think that it is enough to ask such a person certain questions, right? Regarding the child's life, listen, what would you do if my child did this and that? How would you react? How would you react, ok? What would you like to talk to me about? Imagine that there's a situation, right? Perhaps a series of these questions come from the fact that I have different experiences here, right? Work plays a role here as well, as I used to work as a support and I was on various internships until I found out that my child was on the spectrum, so now I know both sides of the story, and I can see what those parents expected from me back then, what I expect from such a person now, right? (R3F1)*

The principal of the establishment also selected the child/student for whom the assistant's support was to be provided. The principals were to select children/students who exhibited difficulties in independent functioning, in communicating, who had low social competences, who presented aggressive and/or self-aggressive behaviour and who made it difficult to coexist with this child/student in the kindergarden/school. After selecting the children/students, the principals informed the parents of this possibility and if the parents agreed, the procedure provided for in the project was followed:

*[...] we've received information from the school, Filip was selected there. (R8F3)*

*That's because our son has a certificate of disability and, erm, at school, we were informed that it was possible for him to have such an assistant, and if we agreed, then the school, the vice principal, would fill in the forms and so on and try to enrol him in the project, erm, and maybe we could get such help, right? And in fact, we learned about the whole project from the vice principal, [...] it seemed to me that Olek's disability is so mild that he will never need anyone's help, and then he went to the kindergarden, [...] he actually needs it, needs to be watched over, needs this help and needs this extra attention. And he's very happy that he's got into this whole program. (R9F3)*

Teachers had little knowledge of the recruitment process. Statements from some of the interviewees indicate that they were informed about working with the assistant once s/he had been selected:

*I have no information regarding how this recruitment was actually carried out. We were informed that there would be an assistant, and that was that. I don't even know how the recruitment is done. (F2N2)*

*Unfortunately, I don't have such knowledge either, [...]. (F2N3)*

*First of all, I have to say that it was presented to us as a fait accompli. (F2N1)*

According to the teachers' statements, the children/students who were recruited to the project and who were provided with the assistant's support **required assistance in various areas** of preschool/school and educational functioning. The special educational needs of the children/students resulted from physical disability, intellectual disability, aphasia and other communicative difficulties, autism spectrum disorder, psychomotor hyperactivity, genetic disorders, hearing and sight impairment, or risk of social maladjustment:

*[...] this is the second year of primary school. He suffers from muscular dystrophy. It's such a disease that after a while, these muscles just don't*

*work as they should. Atrophy develops in these muscles. It is primarily a problem when walking, for example. Up the stairs, for example. This boy is now under the care of a doctor all the time. He is struggling... They are struggling all the time together with his parents so that this disease doesn't progress very, very quickly. They are waiting for a drug that will sort of stop the disease. Of course, we are fighting for Szymek to stay at the level he's at now. So that he can receive this medicine. And we expect him not to have to be in a wheelchair, so his physical fitness has to be that good. And it's also mainly about keeping this boy independent for as long as possible. But, unfortunately, when we go out for walks, Szymek is already moving around in a wheelchair. So it's not a pleasant illness. There are a lot of school absences, but somehow we manage. He has plenty of work, and good contact with his parents who try to look after him. We are coping somehow, but unfortunately, the boy's absences from school don't help either. (F2N1)*

*Someone else was supposed to be our assistant. Because I have two children in wheelchairs in first grade. But that was the mother's decision. Szymek was assigned here. But I also have a girl in first grade who was in a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy, and there was supposed to be an assistant for this girl. But mum decided, and I can say with all conviction and conscience that it was a good decision, to take her to special school. She started to continue her education there in September. So we soon had to find another child in the school who would also need this help. Because the project was already there, and the assistant has been assigned to this child now. (F2N1)*

*As far as the student is concerned, he is primarily mobility impaired. He has hand contractions, so he writes on the computer and uses a keyboard specially designed for him. He also has problems with his eyesight, so the font is bigger, but he doesn't seem to have intellectual problems, so he's able to meet the standard. (F2N2)*

*A four-year-old girl called Ada, who has autism spectrum disorder, is currently in kindergarden. The girl doesn't communicate verbally. She*

*doesn't speak. She only indicates what she's interested in. She doesn't signal her physiological needs, so there's also this problem here when it comes to toileting. She has no contact with other children either. Any loud noises, everything annoys her, irritates her. Just like an autistic child. She can sit on the carpet, pick up her favourite animal, and with these animals, she can play practically for half a day. When it comes to going out to the playground or on walks, she doesn't have any big problem with that, but, well, she doesn't tolerate change, so she doesn't like getting dressed, changing, zipping up her jacket, unzipping, zipping up, so she has bigger problems with that too. She also has problems with eating – you have to control her because you have to feed her, otherwise she won't touch it, you have to call her, so there's a need for assistance here too. (F2N3)*

*As for my boy, his name is Bruno. Bruno suffers from a hernia and aphasia. Mainly, he's mobility impaired. Intellectually, he is as capable as can be, so that's a good thing here. On top of that, he is catheterised, so it's difficult for me here... (F2N4)*

*This child, who is in my group, has neither a diagnosis nor an opinion. There's no evaluation. We only have this description provided by the parents now, but the principal tried to match a SENA with the children, and Staś met the criteria because he displays social maladjustment. This was more of a reason. And the same applies to the other two, I think. Under this social maladjustment aspect, they don't have any opinions or decisions from the counselling centres yet. (F4N8)*

*Ninka's illness hasn't been fully diagnosed. She has physical rather than psychological dysfunctions, although she needs psychological support, too. She is very polite, calm, quiet and capable. (F4N4)*

*[...] last year, in general, this child functioned in such a way that he couldn't cope with a lot of things. He wasn't able to cooperate with his classmates, and he wasn't able to spend time on his own without involving other students and teachers. Unfortunately, when this child was in our care, everyone... Well, everybody had to concentrate exclusively on this boy, Arek. (F4N2)*



*He's an autistic boy, currently in grade 7. And he's so... it's neither a mild form of autism, and we work with Asperger's too, nor a strong, deep degree. (F3N2)*

The recruitment of assistants to the project was a very important element. The project leaders and principals alike wanted the people who – in addition to meeting the basic requirements – engage in working with a child/student with special educational needs and provide them with support in different areas of functioning, improving their quality of life in kindergarden/school. Candidates' main motivation for taking on this task was to **gain new experience** in working with a child/student who requires special needs. In their responses, the assistants emphasised that they had already worked with children but that the work in the project was to be of a completely new nature for them. By undertaking this task, the candidates wanted to enrich their professional competences and skills, to work in a different capacity and to avoid professional burnout, or to prepare for a proper job through participation in the project. Some interviewees also spoke of a professional challenge that would require creativity, education, motivation and self-development:

*[...] however, I wanted to try something else, not because I somehow feel burnt out professionally, although... well, I just wanted to gain some new experience, and maybe after all these 20 happy years it was the right moment to try something new, to find my place somewhere, or not, yet I am satisfied. (A23F3)*

*I wanted to get new experience, I had worked with children before, it was more of a temporary job, but... I just wanted to learn something new, to see how I would fit in. (A22F3)*

*Why did I join the project? I think it was to learn more about how to work with such a child, how to help them and how to establish some... some kind of contact with them, I think that's it. (A22F3)*

*I joined this project because I believe that as a student of special education, I consider it an opportunity to gain experience even earlier, before*

*I graduate and take up a job as a special educator, so I treat this project as an opportunity to gain experience which, later on, will contribute a lot to the career I want to pursue, so that's why. (A10F1)*

*It's certainly a new experience for us, a new challenge so to speak; in my case, being a graduate of a post-secondary school – an occupational therapist – well, it's also definitely broadening of certain knowledge, skills, their development... extending my existing knowledge, yes, what I was afraid of when I started this job was that I would interact with a lot of teachers, that everyone would have their own directives, that we would have to establish separate rules with everyone, and so on and so forth, it was a bit problematic for me, it seemed to me that in this case maybe those who will work in grades 1–3 have it better. (A8F1)*

*Actually, I took part in the project because when I was submitting the documents at my daughter's school for the first grade, the principal spoke to me and asked if I would be willing to take part in such a project. Of course, I signed up because, for example, we have inclusive education, so not only will it be useful to me in my profession, but it's really the kind of experience I wouldn't get anywhere else, yes, especially as it's a job... I mean yes, I work with a child... socially maladjusted. The work is far from easy, so to speak, and maybe it's even lighter with this boy than with his mother. (A2F1)*

*I was just sort of applying to schools as well, I was trying to get a job, because I'm a P.E. teacher by profession, but there weren't any vacant positions there either, and the principal of one school just suggested such a project to me, so... I thought it was a great experience to start with, and indeed it is, it's a very interesting opportunity, I must admit, it's also quite hard to work with autistic children, so... well, it's definitely a kind of school for the beginning of the career. (A17A3)*

Other assistants interviewed spoke of a **desire to help** that motivated them when they applied for the project. They felt that they wanted to help children/students requiring assistance in the preschool/school setting and had an aptitude for this:

*I applied for the project precisely to continue to help children with SEN and disabilities; secondly, I would like to be either a clinical psychologist or a child psychologist at school and this experience as an assistant will come in very handy for me in my future work so those observations, or other, how to work with such children, it all will give me a lot of experience. (A9F2)*

*And I wanted to help this child in some way. I hadn't known this child before, the parents only a little, very little, the mum more. I didn't really know the dad at all. Maybe hearsay, but somehow I didn't have any relation; whereas with the mum I did. (A13F2)*

*The reason is that, as the principal said, autistic children feel safe with me. We also had another girl before who just wanted to be with me all the time from the very beginning, and we decided that this was an opportunity to go that way. (A11F2)*

*My work is of great significance too, where the whole group is concerned, because... well, this kind of help also proves useful for other children who also need some extra support. Because I simply, so to speak, feel comfortable working with children with special needs, I think from my previous job... because I also worked as a teacher's aide before, we also had such children in the group and I always somehow found contact with them, so... well, I thought I'd just... that I'd be up for it, oh yes. (A21F3)*

The study revealed that some respondents found out about the project and the possibility of applying for the position of assistant to a child/student with special educational needs **by accident**. Some respondents had previously worked in educational institutions and had contact with children, so the offer to work as an assistant seemed interesting and provided opportunities for development:

*This is my first time working with children like these, but after this month, I feel... since I enjoy the work very much, I think here that the girl has also accepted me somehow. Intellectually she is very capable, well, she just has this mobility impairment and here I try to help her and assist her all the time. I can honestly say that I just wanted to work at kindergarden,*

*I wanted to give it a try, and this offer just popped up, so I took it, I don't regret it. (A16F3)*

*To work, because there the lady asked if I was there for work – It was pure chance, I had applied for another job, I'd been recommended by a lot of people because I'd worked for a long time in the daycare centre, in the library and the principal said: "you are the right fit and you need to be there" – I don't regret it, it's really enjoyable. (A19F3)*

*I joined the project at the recommendation of the principal, as I had been on a secretarial traineeship at the school, I found myself working with adults as well as children, and I was coming to the end of my internship and I made the decision to go to grade 0, to assist a child. (A24F3)*

*I graduated from rehabilitation, I also just see myself in this job and somehow I succeeded – they were looking for an assistant for a girl, actually I started with a boy, but the boy went to a special school, so still for a girl... well, that's just how I ended up and it's just something I like and it's what... what I want to do, also I feel very happy too, especially since the girl accepted me, and parents..., so it's really great. (A18F3)*

*[...] I am in my first year of early childhood and preschool education studies. I've been working at a kindergarden as a teacher's aide for over a year, as a SENA since August. (A11F2)*

*I got this job purely by accident, because I had just closed my business and was unemployed, so it was like that. I just happened to get this job. I graduated from a secondary school, teaching profile, so it's a bit related. (A12F2)*

*I used to work somewhere else, but I was made redundant, and it made me look for a job a little bit. And I just found out in the kindergarden near our place, in Kindergarten Number 1 in Żywiec with integrative divisions, that there's this..., that I can apply, and that I can start working. [...] I haven't worked with children with disabilities before, only in my third year of such work at the kindergarden, and with Paweł from the beginning, April this year (2022). (A3F1)*

However, a number of respondents decided to become assistants despite having no previous experience of working with children/students or even without an educational background. **Losing one's current job or wanting to change one's career** provided the impulse to participate in the project:

*I graduated in business management. I had never had anything to do with teaching. I applied, sent my CV, because it seemed really interesting to me. I wanted to try it, I just like children very much. (A15F2)*

*Actually, I found this job by accident, because I was leaving the job I had. I don't have any experience in working with children and I heard about this project from a friend somewhere, so I sent in my CV. And I got in, I've always been interested in this subject. I've never been a fan of system schools, and when I found out that this wasn't a system school, I was glad. I've also been in contact with people with disabilities since I was a child, as my brother has epilepsy and developmental disorders... (A6F1)*

*Up to that point, I had been working as a sales person most of the time, although I was also studying to become an occupational therapist and a florist during my time in sales, and I wanted to change something in my life. I wanted to work as an occupational therapist and this was, so to speak, the first step towards becoming an occupational therapist one day, [...]. (A8F1)*

It can be inferred from the narration that the recruitment of SENAs could be carried out by institutions other than the school. The interviewed assistants indicated that a psychological and educational counselling centre might be the institution charged with recruiting and defining responsibilities. Below is one of the statements:

*In fact, I think that if, for example, this year we're working with a particular child, then, for instance, in a year or two, we'll get another child to work with, and s/he will be different, with different problems, and it's impossible to prepare yourself one hundred per cent for this work. I was thinking the other day that I don't know if this is a good direction in general because, after all, psychological-educational counselling centres make decisions*

*about children. It seems to me that there should be guidelines concerning what kind of assessment, I mean, there are actually guidelines, but how should I, a SENA, work with such a child. I wonder whether the counselling centres should delegate us to do such work. (A13F2)*

### Summary

Using qualitative research in the project allowed us to learn about the respondents' experiences and impressions regarding the recruitment process, i.e. its course, the people involved in the process, a SENA's motivation for taking on the job, how and by which means assistants were found, the criterion for selecting children/students to be supported by an assistant. Both assistants and children/students with special educational needs requiring support in the preschool/school space were recruited. Focus studies were conducted with principals, among others, who were mainly responsible for recruiting the assistant and the child/student in need of support. The study also involved parents/mothers whose children were supported by assistants, teachers who worked with the assistants and the assistants themselves.

In the course of the project, it was the principals of the establishments who were responsible for selecting the children/students who required the support of the assistant. They identified children whose special needs resulted from mobility impairment, intellectual disability, aphasia and other communicative problems, autism spectrum, psychomotor hyperactivity, genetic diseases, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and risk of social maladjustment. The principals gave no indication of the rationale they used to select individual children/students for SENA support. It can also be assumed that, first and foremost, principals selected the children/students for whom the assistant's support was to be provided, following the criteria laid down in the project. Once the children/students requiring the most assistance had been selected and once parental consent had been obtained for their child to be covered by SENA support, the principals proceeded to recruit assistants.

Attracting the right people for the assistant position during the recruitment process was crucial to the success of the project. The attitude of the

people recruited, their background and aptitude, as well as their willingness to develop, ensured that the objective was met. From the perspective of the principals organising the recruitment for the project, it was a very demanding process. The recruitment process was open, and information about the assistant position was published on the institutions' websites as well as shared on social media and through informal communication channels. From the analysis of the information obtained during the focus group study, it is clear that the terms and conditions of employment were not adequate for the responsibility of becoming an assistant, which, among other things, resulted in a limited number of applicants. Directors also emphasised that procedural considerations (long waiting period for employment) constituted additional obstacles to recruitment and, as a consequence, potential candidates declined offers of employment. The low number of applicants resulted in the directors of the establishments offering the position of assistant to people with whom they had worked previously (interns, teachers, parents).

The analysis of the empirical data reveals that recruiting for the position of assistant posed a major challenge. Interviews with principals show that they felt a great responsibility to select people who were expected to have the qualifications, skills and experience to respond appropriately to the special educational needs of children/students. During the interviews with the candidates, the principals received support from the parents of the children requiring assistant care. The study revealed that principals were surprised to hear that mothers were involved in the recruitment process for assistants. Some of the mothers interviewed were also surprised by this fact, as they felt that they lacked the necessary competences and relied on the principals and their experience. Other mothers were pleased to have the opportunity to participate in the interview with the candidate for their child's SENA, as this gave them the opportunity to get to know him/her, establish a relationship with him/her and present their child's needs. Finally, principals emphasised their satisfaction with the participation of the parents/mothers of their child/student with SEN in the SENA recruitment process, as they received parental support from them, and mothers had confidence that their child's SEN assistant was both competent and committed.

Candidates for assistants who applied for the project were mainly people who wanted to gain new experience in working with a child/student who exhibits special educational needs at a kindergarden/school. Such candidates had previously worked in educational institutions in a variety of positions, but working as an assistant to a child/student with special educational needs presented them with a challenge as well as an opportunity for professional and personal development. Having analysed the factors motivating those willing to take up work as an assistant, it is possible to note that a large proportion of assistants decided to take up this task by chance. One advantage was that they had experience working with children/students and an educational background. The study shows that there is also a group of assistants who had no contact with children/students, did not work in educational and care-providing institutions and had no educational background before joining the project. Factors such as not having a job in a learned profession or potential professional burnout determined the decision to become an assistant.

The study on recruitment of assistants and children/students in need of assistant support allows us to carefully draw conclusions and recommendations:

- › recruitment procedures should be refined and not subject to change during the course of the project. This will reduce the risk of failure in the recruitment of an assistant and ensure that candidates can be selected from a larger number of people;
- › the recruitment criteria for the SENA post need to be modified. This will ensure the elimination of random applicants with no educational background;
- › ensuring adequate employment conditions appropriate to the assistants' duties would increase the number of applicants for the SENA post and guarantee job stability.

### 3.3.2. Preparing assistants to work with students

Preparing assistants to work with students/children with special educational needs was another area of our research inquiry. Five overarching themes



emerged from the analyses: (a) Positive aspects of the training cycle dedicated to assistants; (b) The challenges of preparing for SENA work; (c) Preparation for work in addition to training; (d) Assessment of the quality and outcome of training and (e) In search of optimal training for SENAs. Table 27 summarises the above overarching themes and the subordinate specific themes.

**Table 28.** Groups of topics in the area of preparing assistants to work with students with special educational needs

Positive aspects of the training cycle dedicated to assistants
Proper planning of the agenda and selection of training topics Well prepared trainers Possibility to learn from each other Training linked to the specific nature of functioning of the supported child Possibility to choose activities within the training cycle Training as an inspiration for further professional development
The challenges of preparing for SENA work
Content of the training: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– overly narrow scope of content, including lack of specific issues, e.g. on a SENA's responsibilities,</li> <li>– too broad a content: overwhelming the assistants with (not always necessary) content,</li> <li>– mismatch between training topics and the specific functioning of the supported child</li> </ul> Number of sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– too many sessions (overwhelming SENAs with too many training courses),</li> <li>– few sessions, especially elective sessions (a sense of insufficiency, lack of required knowledge and skills)</li> </ul> Organisation of training: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– organising training during scheduled working hours,</li> <li>– postponement of training,</li> <li>– no flexibility in the selection of training dates.</li> <li>– training venues distant from SENA's places of residence (problems in reaching them)</li> </ul> Stress related to thinking about the future of the assistant's job Lack of or inappropriate training topics for fellow school employees
Preparation for work in addition to training
Previous experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– education (particularly of a pedagogical nature),</li> <li>– other training in preparation for working with a child (with special educational needs),</li> <li>– previous work with children/people with disabilities,</li> <li>– informal care of a child with disabilities,</li> <li>– being a parent of a child with disabilities</li> </ul> Experience gained during SENA work

Assessment of the quality and outcome of training
Increased knowledge and skills of SENA SENA's positive relationships with the children/students supported, their parents and teachers SENA's sense of satisfaction SENA's sense of (excessive) workload Belief that the training is not very efficient and that a SENA lacks relevant skills
In search of optimal training for SENAs
Expectations towards assistants Training topics – between matching the specific functioning of the child/student supported and multi-area education Scope of training – between university education and further training Preferred form of training Preferred times of training

Source: own study.

The first of the highlighted themes concerned the **positive aspects of the training course dedicated to assistants**. In this area, respondents' statements indicating the good preparation of the training course content and topics were most pronounced in the respondents' narratives. This theme was most often raised by directors and assistants themselves, describing the training as, among other things, "nice [and – author's note] very well prepared" (A19F3), "very interesting" (A21F3), "informative [...] and well thought out" (A20F3), "very valuable and that's a big plus" (D11F2), "very practical, professional and really substantive" (D23F4). The diversity of topics covered was also highlighted: "the topics varied, so everyone was able to match their child in care to the relevant subject" (A20F3). According to participants, the training courses accurately addressed the needs of (future) assistants and equipped them with essential skills, preparing them to work with a child/student with special educational needs.

Participants in the study further noted that the instructors and lecturers – the trainers – were well prepared. Regardless of the form of training (remote or on-site), they appreciated that the classes "were concretely laid out" (A19F3) and "coolly conducted" (A22F3). According to the assistants who participated in the interviews, the trainers were able to engage the

participants and used a variety of materials and teaching aids, equipping the trainees with tools useful for working with the child/student receiving assistance. The trainers' proactive approach encouraged attention. As one director interviewed stated, "they [the assistants – author's note] say they don't know when the time of the session is up," D23F4).

Respondents also highly valued the opportunity to exchange experiences between assistants – the chance to learn from each other during training. The assistants surveyed spoke of a positive atmosphere ("the atmosphere was great too" A20F3). Thanks to it, as one assistant pointed out, "we got to exchange views, experiences that we already had" (A22F3). Such exchanges facilitated development and let participants see that they were not 'alone' in experiencing different problems and looking for new solutions, drawing on the knowledge of other assistants' successes and challenges. A19F3 described this process as follows:

*[...] my group is as talkative as I am, and there's bickering... and constantly... everyone says something, a lot of times we could just talk to each other, tell each other how things work, certain problems were brought up, we helped each other. (A19F3)*

Another category that emerged from the first identified overarching theme is the link between the training and the specific nature of the supported child's functioning. The following are sample narratives:

*As far as the training that has been done so far is concerned.... it's helped me a lot and now I'm just waiting for the training in this category for aphasia and multiple disabilities, trainings that precisely relate to my girl. Well, so I'm just waiting for those trainings so that I can get answers to my questions there, or any problems that I have with my child. (A16F3)*

*I'm now signed up for Saturday... for the topics of auto-aggression and aggression among children and I'm also really looking forward to this training because we also have another boy in the group, who, well, unfortunately manifests such behaviour, yes, and it's nice for us that we'll be able to learn something extra. (A21F3)*

Statements such as the one above reveal a close link between training and practice – the day-to-day tasks of working with a child/student with special educational needs. What's important is that another category is connected to the one above, namely the possibility to select sessions within the training cycle. This was highlighted by a large group of assistants who emphasised that this allowed them to adapt the topics of the training to the difficulties they were currently experiencing at work. This is illustrated by the statements below:

*It's also great that the training we're going to have now, which we've chosen for ourselves there after the new year, are strictly tailored to the specific needs of our students, [...] there were some areas which... well, I don't know much about, so I'm very pleased with that. (A23F3)*

*I'm very satisfied with the training sessions, especially the ones we were able to pick for ourselves this time. (A24F3)*

The last category distinguished under the first theme is related to the motivational and inspirational function of training. Training was considered here as an inspiration for assistants to continue developing in their professional journey. As one assistant stated:

*Work at school has currently inspired me to take a postgraduate course in teacher training, so I see myself sort of going into education in the future. I'd like to become a support teacher, so I'm studying to be able to pursue such a career in the future. (A7F1)*

The work of an assistant for a student with special educational needs is considered here as an *important* step in a career oriented towards supporting children with individual needs and contributes to undertaking activities (seeking and enrolling and pursuing other training, courses, studies) that would help to perform this work better and/or prepare for a job as a teacher.

The second overarching theme that was identified concerned **the challenges of preparing assistants for their work**. The training provided to SENAs did not always meet the expectations of assistants, parents, teachers and principals. The challenges they discussed related to areas such as the

extent of the subject matter covered in training (content that was either too limited or too extensive and the mismatch between the training topics and the specific nature of the supported child's functioning), the number of activities (too many or, on the contrary, too few activities, especially optional activities), the organisation of the training, the emotions related to thinking about the future of the assistant's work, and the limited outreach of the training on SENA work to other school staff. These aspects are described below.

With regard to the issues addressed in training, when commenting on the challenges, assistants indicated both that certain issues (in their opinion, important for a SENA's work) were missing and, in some cases, that the content covered in the agenda was not useful in their work (too much content). The first of these issues was raised more frequently. A number of interviewees emphasised that the training cycle lacked content that could have helped them perform SENA tasks in their daily work:

*Yes, as far as training is concerned, I'd like to see more real-life examples in these training sessions, when, for example, we ask about a problem that concerns us, to be given some tips, maybe not one, maybe two or three, to solve the problem, because... well, there's no right answer for every single case, so if, for example, this doesn't work, maybe that will, so, these are just examples in these trainings when it comes to our work, solutions to these problems... (A2F1)*

*I'd say we need more meetings. Say, I don't know, with a psychologist or about revalidation. (A9F2)*

*Maybe, looking at the fact that I have a child with an intellectual disability, I'd like to know what range of material the child has to learn and what she doesn't have to learn anymore, because at times, it's like we work together with her with the material as well, because it was in class, so you have to, and I'd like to know that: up to this point it's enough. Because there are probably some guidelines out there, teachers probably have certain guidelines, what and how, for which child, there must be. Well, I don't have that kind of knowledge, so I'd like to know that much more, right? (A13F2)*

Assistants spoke of the need to receive knowledge and to learn about strategies for dealing with problems they may encounter in the course of their work. Other statements testify to the assistants' sense of insufficiency in terms of knowledge of their scope of responsibilities:

*[...] [the training – author's note] definitely need to be more specific in terms of responsibilities, what we do here. The scope of responsibilities that we received from the organisers is very broad. It is not specific. (A10F2)*

Failure to discuss certain issues significant to the assistants during the training cycle conducted was later reflected in their work. Here, some respondents spoke of their confusion, feelings of uncertainty and frustration or, on the contrary, of mobilisation and searching for the necessary information on their own. The narrative below may serve as an example A9F2:

*There haven't been all the training sessions, so I don't feel prepared for SENA's work. Also, one optional, most important training about strategies was missing, so I'm learning on my own. You could say that when I studied clinical psychology at university, I read about the autism spectrum in general, so here I'm looking for information on my own. So that's a short-coming for me, this optional training should've been first to do, or first aid, I shouldn't have to look for it on my own. I mean, self-development is important in the job, but you have to come in with certain tools, right? So that it can be corrected later, I think. (A9F2)*

Here, the assistant saw the downside resulting from the inadequate scheduling of training over time. Like many of the other interviewees, he felt that he was not sufficiently prepared (having the right 'tools', or knowledge of strategies to deal with problems) when he started work.

In contrast, other assistants highlighted what they considered to be unnecessary elements of training which they were required to attend and which did not relate specifically to working with the child/student they were assisting:

*[...] there are first aid training courses, two-day sessions, where truly everything is covered, i.e. feeding the child, administering medication...*

*Not all of us work with a child like that, so I think it should be so much more specific and more tailored to what we actually need, rather than everything being covered in this general way. (A10F2)*

The issue of the mismatch between the subject matter of the training and the specific nature of the supported child's functioning was also raised in other contributions:

*[...] I don't look after any people with physical disabilities, so I was completely uninterested, for example, in the kind of personal hygiene activities of such people and so on... (A2F1)*

In these cases, the assistants were keen to be able to choose a subject matter that would precisely meet the needs of (only) the child under their support.

In addition to the training topics, interviewees also drew attention to the challenges associated with the number of activities they were engaged in as part of the mandatory training cycle for SENAs. Interestingly, two extreme positions emerged in the interviewees' statements in this regard, either indicating that there were too many compulsory activities (resulting in a heavy workload for the assistants and difficulties in organising work at school or establishment, or, conversely, too few activities (resulting in assistants' sense of inadequacy and absence of specific skills or knowledge useful in supporting the child/student). The former position was more often echoed by principals who had to organise the work at school during a SENA's absence, while the latter was found among assistants themselves and somewhat less frequently among teachers.

Those assistants who indicated that the number of training sessions was low referred in particular to elective classes, the number of which, imposed top-down, was limited to just two. The following statements illustrate this problem:

*Another thing I'd like to say about these training sessions is that once, for example, we had to choose two training sessions. [...] we had to choose two training courses, and I, frankly speaking, was more interested in the*

*issues addressed in these other trainings, for instance, and... Well, I would have preferred, for example, to have unlimited choice. (A2F1)*

*I'd suggest more training, because I love to learn and I would welcome any form of additional training here, so I'm open to more training, whether online or on-site. It would be useful to have more of that, in my opinion, since we know what it's like during and before work. Well, it... gets verified afterwards, so that it's... we encounter different situations, and we don't know how to react... (A7F1)*

One of the reasons assistants felt that there should be more access to training provision (the option to choose more training courses) is the need to prepare SENAs to work with different children/students they might meet in their professional careers. As A2F1 stated:

*OK, I assist this child, but for example, I don't know, in six months' time, or next year, I might have another child, with other kinds of difficulties, where, for instance, all this information from the training... e.g. aggressive people and so on, will be completely of no use to me, because it's possible that this child is not aggressive at all, it's just quiet for example, right? Or, let's say, I don't know, withdrawn or... or in a wheelchair... And then I personally... Well, for instance, I don't know how to work with a child in a wheelchair, because I have, [...] to put it like this, experience only with an aggressive child, and it seems to me that [an assistant – author's note] should have a much broader world view, ok? A broader knowledge, more extensive, and not so limited, just for one child, because if... let me state this... if this profession were to take off, we would simply like to know how to work not only with a specific child, but with different children, with all kinds of problems. (A2F1)*

Another set of challenges related to the preparation of assistants for their work concerned the organisation of the training. As one principal summed it up:

*So, organisationally [...], well, unfortunately, it's also not very impressive. (D18F3).*



The organisational difficulties pointed out by the participants in the focus groups concerned the following aspects:

- › incorrect proportion in the number of scheduled training hours before and after starting work as a SENA (not enough hours beforehand),
- › organising the training during regular scheduled working hours,
- › postponing training (“*this visit’s then, not then,*” D18F3),
- › no flexibility in choosing training dates,
- › training venues distant from the SENA’s places of residence (problems in reaching the venue).

As can be seen, many of the challenges mentioned above relate to the designated training time. Problems in this regard were highlighted by both assistants themselves, principals and teachers. Respondents were most vocal in their statements about what they considered to be an inadequate ratio of the amount of time allocated to training before and after starting work as an assistant. All participants (from every group surveyed) expressed the belief that more training should take place before assistants start working in a school/establishment with a particular child. This is reflected in the following statements:

*In my opinion, this training should be done before the start of the job in general [...] there should be more beforehand, or right at the beginning, and not, like me, for example, I started on the first of April and I still don’t know everything. (A15F2)*

*As far as the training is concerned... it’s very nice, but didn’t you Ladies [addresses other principals participating in the interview] feel that these trainings are a bit at the expense of this lady having to come to work? [...] There are indeed quite a lot of these training sessions that this woman has to go through. (D5F1)*

As the above statements demonstrate, both assistants and principals were committed to ensuring that SENA was well prepared before s/he started work. This would make it easier to organise the assistant’s work (regular work with the child/student) and the school’s/establishment’s work (no need to look for substitutes or rearrange classes), and could also give a sense of

satisfaction at completing a certain stage (preparation for work – training) and greater confidence in carrying out his/her tasks.

Other problems related to the timing of the training concerned the length of the training during each day (too many hours per day) and the lack of being given notice of the training date early enough (with more time in advance). Below are examples of statements by assistants and principals that illustrate these problems:

*It wasn't about preparing [...] us in a somewhat accessible way, it was just the day before when the information came, and it was July or August, that there was a training the following day, from eight a.m. to four p.m. And it wasn't just one subject, but there were several very different subjects during that one whole day. (A10F2)*

*I'd also like to add that the online training sessions were certainly too long. That is to say, there were training sessions from eight o'clock to four o'clock. I think it was just overloaded with content. It was harder for us to sort of understand what the work was going to look like, because it all got so concentrated in this very short period of time. (A10F2)*

*We regret that the assistants are trained at such hours where it is problematic for us. For all those who work during the day these training sessions would most likely have to be held in the evenings. So, this is what we have to say about the organisation of the whole project. (D6F1)*

For principals, it was important to organise work at the school/establishment – to be able to ‘make use of’ the assistant at work (if possible – without last-minute absence due to participation in training). In turn, for the assistants, work comfort (not being overloaded with a lot of work/training) and the chance to enjoy work-life balance (being able to plan free time taking into account information about training dates early enough) were the key issues.

The aforementioned comfort of work was not ensured, especially in those situations where SENAs were simultaneously attending remote training and carrying out their tasks at work, supporting the child/student. This was reported by one assistant:

*These trainings are often organised during working hours, during lessons. I know that emails aren't forwarded to principals, for example, that such training sessions were going to take place, and some of the ladies are simply conducting these lessons then and have to divide their attention between the training and the student they are assisting. [...] it would be nice to think about letting the principal know that this day or that day there's a training then and then, and to free up the assistant for that time, so that s/he can devote 100% of their time to the training, and really get something valuable out of it, rather than simply sitting in the classroom, unable to speak because it's noisy, not wanting to disturb the lessons, assisting here, and so on, so I think it'd be good to work on that, too. To pay attention to that, that the principals are supposed to be informed and some of us, if some of us have this delegation and actually stay at home, then why is this other assistant, who acts... well, works under the same conditions and in the same position, is supposed to do two jobs during that time, so that's a little bit off. (A6F1)*

The foregoing statement reveals that some assistants experienced difficult situations involving an overload of duties of two kinds. The first was combining professional duties with mandatory training (at the same time). The second concerned the burden of additional tasks (supporting another child to substitute for an absent assistant).

Speaking of comfort, some assistants also commented on the inconvenience of the training location:

*[...] now, I have first aid in January in Gdańsk, it's a hundred and twenty kilometres away, two days, so... this first aid – could be a bit closer... (A24F3)*

Another category related to the challenges of training concerned the emotions felt by the assistants when thinking about the future of their work as a SENA. Here, respondents spoke of great uncertainty and even anxiety. They were aware that they were investing a lot in themselves and gaining new competences, but were unsure whether these would be useful after the project had concluded. As one interviewee noted:

*It remains to be seen whether this profession will continue to survive, whether we'll find jobs later on ... (A24F3)*

The final category under the second overarching theme concerned the lack of or insufficient outreach of training on SENA's work to other school staff. Below are two sample statements illustrating this position:

*Rather, when it comes to the training itself, it's maybe more about the school authorities or the teachers, so that they understand more, as it were, the essence of this work that we do. (A4F1)*

*I would also suggest some kind of training for teachers, because a lot of people at my school weren't aware of what I was doing, whether I was supposed to write instead of a student, whether I was supposed to take a test for them – I mean, that he was dictating and I was writing – well, [...] I had to explain to some people what it was about, because they didn't understand the essence of [...], which was so strange to me, because, after all, the principal hired me, so they should introduce it at the teachers' meeting, what it is really about, and it was just announced that we're there were [...], and that's it, the end. (A7F1)*

According to the respondents, both principals and teachers should be informed about the rules of employment of the assistant, his/her duties or the possibility of involving the assistant in the work of the school or establishment. As A4F1 went on to say:

*As far as school authorities are concerned, because some of them are introduced, some are not, some of them are somewhat integrated quite efficiently into the whole system, and some are not, I don't go to teachers' meetings, I'm not a member of any teams, but some people are, some people are given their work logs to complete, they're sort of a very active participants in teams, and it's more or less where I would make some changes. (A4F1)*

The third overarching theme featured was **preparation for work outside the training cycle** offered under this project. Here, respondents pointed to both their experience and qualifications gained prior to joining the

“Special Educational Needs Teaching Assistant” project and those gained during their work as teaching assistants. The tertiary education they had (especially with teaching training courses), as well as other training preparing them to work with a child (with special educational needs), were considered valuable and useful in their work as a SENA. A large proportion of the assistants held a university degree, including a teacher training course. Therefore, they possessed a considerable pool of knowledge, which was consolidated or extended during training. Moreover, such assistants often had experience working as teacher-educators, and participation in the project was one of the stages in their professional path involving work with children. The following statement may serve as an example:

*I worked a little bit in a primary school as a daycare teacher, a substitute. That's where they suggested this project to me, so that I could stay in the profession, because, so to speak, the spectrum of rehabilitation facilities is non-existent in a small town, which is why I'm in this project. When it comes to special education, so to speak, I can always supplement this knowledge... (A5F1)*

A similar view was shared by principals, who saw educational background as an important asset when hiring assistants and evaluating their work:

*[...] I believe that the level of education matters. At my school, it's the psychologists, it's the teachers, so, recruiting people, you know – they more or less have an idea of what kind of job they're applying for. There's a special educator working as a SENA at my work, too, the psychologist acts as a teacher's aide to the child, yet not under the project; here there's a special educator, the others are all teachers, people with qualifications, that's what I rely on as well. In my opinion, these cannot be random people coming from the street, because when you work with children in primary school, even with those who are in the seventh grade, you need to have some idea of that sort of child development. You have to support these children in various ways. [...] education proves very helpful and you also need to have a different approach to parents, such a person is introduced to parents in a different way. Parents at our place are demanding and*

*they ask what is your educational background and it's much easier to tell me that this is, for example, a student, but on a teacher training module; that this is, for instance, a teacher with a degree, not, say, someone who is a chef. [...] As I say – it's a lot easier to get into a role if you have this education. (D13F2)*

*[...] fortune favoured us, because the lady who's now the assistant has an educational background, she graduated in teaching, she's such an empathetic, committed person that, well, we only wish for such assistants in the future. (D11F2)*

As the preceding as well as other narratives reveal, education (especially a teacher training course) is combined with various qualities and competences that prove useful in the work of an assistant. These include expertise in child development and understanding of the child, empathy, coping skills, ability to cooperate (with children, with parents), and higher status (which is helpful in relations with parents).

It is worth noting that education of a pedagogical nature does not have to consist of a full bachelor's or master's degree. The positive impact of studying and working as an assistant at the same time was acknowledged by both assistants and principals alike. Below is a statement indicating the benefits of the combination of both these roles:

*[...] having this theoretical foundation, a background, it's probably easier for her. Just like one of these young ladies who's at a teacher training module, so there's a theoretical basis somewhere there too; they can verify it easily in practice. (D14F2)*

It needs to be noted at this point that educational training was regarded as an important element of preparation for the assistant's job, primarily by members of the teaching staff – principals and teachers. Parents were often of the opposite opinion and stressed that it was not essential nor even an important condition to carry out the assistant's work well:

*[...] I believe, [...] that assistants shouldn't include only people with some... pedagogical or psychological education, but they should, they could also*

*be people who simply completed these training sessions and... Because I don't think that, I don't know, that such people lack anything, right? Because familiarity with certain difficulties is enough, right? And internal patience, and this willingness to help in such a way to... to be with these children, and not just five years of studies, ok? Not the number of degrees, right? (R3F1)*

In turn, a significant number of respondents from all participant groups described various courses, training, workshops and schools (e.g. post-secondary) as useful, especially those that gave assistants specific skills to do their job professionally and/or in a manner appealing to the child. These included training courses in Sherborne Developmental Movement, training in dealing with aggression and violence in students, and music school (giving, for example, the ability to play instruments that can later be taught to students). This was appreciated, for example, by one of the principals interviewed:

*She's finished a healthcare assistant course, so here she additionally has that extended knowledge. That's a plus. (D12F2)*

In addition to university education and various types of training, work experience with children or, less frequently, adults in need of assistance was also seen as preparation for the role of assistant for a significant number of SENAs. Work experience was treated as an advantage by parents, teachers and principals alike:

*Our assistant has studied early childhood education with preschool education [...], graduated, it's already a plus for her that... that she's experienced. (R1F1)*

*SENAs are ladies who already have experience. Here, we've already won, because they've already worked as children's aides. They get a lot out of these trainings along the way. They've gained more experience, and they get on very well with the children. [...] I wouldn't substitute these ladies. (D7F1)*

*In the end, I managed to get one, because I happen to be so lucky that the school is adjacent to a social welfare centre and the ladies are employees of this centre. This is very good, on the plus side, as it were. Because these ladies [...] have already had some experience in this area as employees of the social care centre, but I keep saying that I admire them, because they work part-time, so the pay is really minimal, and yet they devote a lot of time to these children and do a lot of good. (D18F3)*

A number of assistants worked in institutions where they had been previously employed as SENAs – as teacher aides, teachers or as part of student apprenticeships. This was a good starting point for them and allowed them to seamlessly integrate into the teaching staff environment:

*Because [...] the assistant had been on the apprenticeship before and had gone through, as it were, these stages of the apprenticeship of speech therapist, educator, special educator, teachers, so it was easy for her to enter this circle. And she learnt all these things as if here, at school, that is, updating the procedures on how to proceed, how to organise psychological and educational support, changing the statute, writing individual educational and therapeutic programmes, individual conversations with students, with parents, not only with Patryk's parents. Discussions, but also, above all, all the training we had as educators... she was at all these trainings, extremely open, extremely willing. And this very openness of hers, also resulted in such a welcoming reception among the educators. (D9F2)*

In addition to previous professional experience, some interviewees further emphasised the relevance of non-professional experience, such as the assistant's informal care of a person with a disability (e.g. a sibling) or acting as a parent of a child with a disability. This entailed being well-informed about various issues related to disability, including the specific functioning of such persons, but also being able to be supportive and empathetic.

In addition to the training, the preparation also concerned the day-to-day work that the assistants had to do. As one assistant noted:

*[...] I can honestly say that a lot has to be learnt simply from life, when you start work, too... so the work, it teaches us everything, and training*



*courses, very interesting, but, as I say, well, at work it just... it all comes out how it actually is. (A18F3)*

Through regular contact and cooperation with the child/student in need of support as well as with the teacher/educator who has completed teacher training and the parent, the assistants gained the experience necessary to develop their competences.

Another overarching theme concerned the **evaluation of the quality and efficiency of the training** offered to assistants. Within this thematic focus, an increase in SENAs' knowledge and skills was a dominant specific theme. As the participants in the interviews noted, the assistants gained knowledge and competences in supporting the child/student through good training. The topics they rated particularly positively were those closely related to working with the specific child/student they were providing assistance to. These were usually additional (elective) classes devoted to different areas of work with children with specific needs (e.g. behavioural disorders or autism spectrum disorders):

*[...] I have learnt a lot from them [the training courses – author's note] and I have no reservations... (A20F3)*

*[The assistants – author's note] praised the training, [...] that it was very educational. [...] [T]hey felt that all the messages conveyed were really comprehensive. [...] That it was really possible for them to gain this knowledge and skills. (D22F4)*

*They [the assistants – author's note] are so well trained that they really know how to handle any situation and how to deal with [...] even the most challenging case. Thus, it's really a series of trainings prepared for these SENAs. Even though it was inconvenient for them. (D22F4)*

What is important is that proper preparation of the assistants (resulting from participation in training courses) was also acknowledged by the parents. This is evidenced by the following statements:

*It seems to me that you prepare these ladies very well and I'm satisfied, no complaints, whatsoever. [...] She [the assistant – author's note] has put*

*a lot of effort into it and it seems to me that the training gets you cooperating with the parents, what she can, can't do, even what she doesn't have to do, so it's like one thing led to another and complemented everything, these competences now and I think that [...] there was never, at least with us, anything she has done wrong, anything she couldn't do. I'm satisfied. [...]* (R7F2)

*[...] because the assistant is well prepared, one hundred percent, even more, right? Because it's not just some training like, he comes in, there's knowledge transferred, no, there's also transfer of this knowledge into practice [...]* (R6F2)

*I'm genuinely full of admiration here, and that the assistant, in just one month, right? Well, she practically got to know my daughter really well, she knew a lot of things that I was just shocked that she could have such an insight into my daughter within such a... such a short period of time, ok? So here, well, I think it's great.* (R2F1)

According to participants in the study, the training also contributed to forming positive relationships between the assistants and the children/students supported, their parents and teachers. This skill was particularly valued by parents, as evidenced by one mother who, describing her son's assistant, noted:

*Ms Mariola is perfectly prepared, she and Janek get along very well.* (R8F3)

Training also gave assistants a sense of satisfaction, of being well prepared, feeling confident and even being an expert in the work they were doing. As evidenced by the principals quoted below:

*As you conducted the training and this scope of training got wider and wider, it was as if the questions stopped and the lady found a different path thanks to you and the fact that her competence also increased and she just asked fewer and fewer questions. She knew, she became confident, so she knew where to look for information. So I think this cycle of training is perfectly tailored.* (D19F3)

*My ladies [assistants – author’s note] [...] were very pleased, because they felt they had learnt some things they weren’t quite sure of so far, that they had only rudimentary knowledge of the principles of first aid. Now they have a thorough understanding of all the different situations they might find themselves in. (D17F3)*

Not all respondents recognised solely the positive effects of the training. Another category involved a sense of frustration and a lack of appropriate skills among assistants. This was particularly evident in the statements of three groups of respondents – the assistants themselves, the principals and the teachers. They often referred to the need to combine work with training:

*They [assistants – author’s note] completed 50% of this training before employment, 50% in the course of their work. It was certainly burdensome. (D22F4)*

As for the group of parents, the category distinguished here appeared very rarely in the narratives. However, despite the generally high level of satisfaction among parents with the SENAs’ preparation and the quality of their work, some of them noted certain shortcomings that could be addressed in the training. Most often, that meant SENA’s ability to conduct specific activities or therapies. Below is a statement illustrating this view:

*In Bartek’s case, it would be great if the assistant had this speech therapy background. (R9F3)*

It should be noted that statements indicating dissatisfaction with the quality of training were sporadic both in the group of assistants themselves and among other groups of respondents. However, this category appeared in relation to the training of teaching staff (teachers and principals). An example of such a narrative is given below:

*Unfortunately, the reception of the training at my school was very negative. Sadly, teachers learnt nothing new from the training. [...] as I say, we have been heavily involved in inclusive education for many years and my specialists were bored during these training sessions and said it was a waste of time. (D18F3)*

The statement above demonstrates teachers' lack of satisfaction due to their failure to experience the interest-generating 'novelty element', which was experienced by the assistants at the training sessions:

*It was certainly interesting for them. Something new and they were so keen to talk about it. (D25F4)*

Some interviewees voiced a conviction that there was little efficiency in training and no relevant skills in SENA. The assistants themselves rarely spoke of gaps in their knowledge and skills, although there were times, as in the case of A7F1, when they felt a certain insufficiency of knowledge due to the lack of specific training or the inability to sign up for more than two additional training sessions:

*I, for example, just didn't know how to react to my student's behaviour in that he just asked me everything all the time and there was no interest in the lesson. I was also instructed at school to observe from the side, but I wasn't told how to observe him from the side if he kept coming up to me, so it's that kind of expectation versus reality here and I kind of need that kind of approach here... (A7F1)*

Teachers and principals referred to this category more frequently:

*I don't want to upset anyone, of course... Well, I'm in quite a tough spot, but if your assistant approaches the stairs with the boy in front of her, it's hard to talk about any kind of preparation. (F2N1)*

*[...] she [the assistant – author's note] she is too young. She doesn't know what she doesn't know yet. And perhaps if she were to be in this situation for a longer time... And maybe by the end of the project, when we'll have an honest conversation, she'll have prepared more serious questions. But I think that this is not the time. She still has too little knowledge, too little experience. (D24F4)*

The last overarching theme highlighted, i.e., **in search of optimal training for SENAs**, focused on participants' perceptions of the 'ideal' preparation of assistants for their work. The categories that emerged in this area were:

expectations towards assistants, topics of training, scope (extension) of training, form of training, times of training, and institutions involved in hiring and defining SENA's responsibilities.

As for the first category mentioned, it was most often referred to by parents of children/students assisted by SENAs. When talking about the expectations of the assistants, parents usually pointed to the need for them to learn soft skills, which are not easy to develop during training. As one mother pointed out:

*it's not written anywhere that an assistant has to hold some extraordinary degrees, right? (R1F1)*

Parents considered the following to be of more significance: empathy, willingness to work with and help the child (caring), self-confidence, commitment and energy, cordiality, attentiveness and warmth, openness, calmness and patience, the assistant having interests similar to the child, a temperament similar to that of the child. As the parents themselves indicated, these are qualities and competences that are "difficult to verify" (R10F3) at the recruitment level and difficult to shape during training courses preparing for the assistant's job. The parents interviewed expressed the belief that there are certain aptitudes for the assistant's profession that are more important than the skills acquired even in the course of five-year studies, which in the eyes of the parent puts the assistant in a position superior to that of a teacher. In doing so, the assistant's role comes close to that of a parent:

*Well, for me the best quality is the empathy, the approach to the child, I can see by watching our assistant that this is how he behaves, not like a teacher, not like a stranger, but like a parent. (R1F1).*

As one mother remarked, an assistant

*is someone who radiates passion, who emanates this desire to work with children. It's not the kind of job I'm going to go and just do, it's just something I'm internally committed to, I enjoy it and that's what it's all about." (R10F3)*

Just like parents, teachers and principals also expected assistants to be committed and willing to work with a child/student with special educational needs. Nevertheless, in all groups interviewed, participants also articulated various expectations regarding SENAs, referring specifically to the knowledge and skills that should be developed during training. One such statement is presented below:

*[...] Knowledge of these... this absence..., deficiencies in the child is also important, they must have this, you know... educational background, what else do I think they need to be? Well, they have to be attentive, to be able to recognise progress or assess whether the child is making any progress... And I think that's it. Well, and to know what to do, how to apply it, to somehow get an improvement in that progress, right? That is... I mean, some... I don't know, some actions, certain, I don't know, activities, behaviour can, can cause a child to willingly do something or [...] want to start doing something at all. (R9F3)*

Participants called for the following aspects to be included in SENA job preparation training:

- › include disability-related information (different types of disability or a specific disability – diagnosed in the child/student to be supported), including specific functioning and support of persons with disabilities,
- › include information on how to ensure the safety of children/students (e.g. appropriate assistance when using a wheelchair);
- › prepare the assistant to work with the child/student (e.g. forming a positive relationship, familiarity with strategies for motivating the child/student),
- › equip the assistant with knowledge of strategies to handle problematic situations (e.g. violent outbursts).

Most of the participants interviewed indicated that the practical nature of the training (workshop) was essential in this respect – practising specific behaviours that adequately addressed the needs of the child/student being supported. This was stressed, among others, by one principal:

*There is no doubt [that training is necessary – author’s note] about how to deal with all these different situations. [...] Sort of gaining this professional knowledge. [...] To put it simply, practical. (D22F4)*

As far as the subject matter of the training was concerned, the positions of the focus group participants oscillated between a belief that the subject matter should be tailored to the specific nature of the functioning of the child/student to be supported and a conviction that multidisciplinary training was required to prepare them to work with children with varying difficulties. A large proportion of those interviewed, particularly assistants, drew attention to the need to match the training received by SENA to the specific functioning of the child/student to be supported:

*[I wish] [t]hat once it is known what kind of child it is, that such a SENA would receive training for strategies related to how to look after such a child. (A9F2)*

*[...] we certainly need more, it appears to me now, if we’re working... I don’t know... with aphasia, with Asperger and so on, then those more subject-specific... more specialised training, but from what I’ve read there will be some... (A4F1)*

However, there were also voices indicating the need for general preparation for working with children/students with special educational needs. These voices were clearly noticeable among assistants, but were particularly explicit among principals, responsible for organising work in the establishment and convinced that assistants needed *expert knowledge about different disabilities*. (D23F4). Below is a selection of these:

*It seems to me that if such... assistants to support students with difficulties were to be created, and if such assistants were to be trained, it seems to me that they should be trained by means of a full platform of sorts... (A2F1)*

*[We need] precisely this ability to react to different situations. Because these are children who often don’t have that developed imagination, who react emotionally, who have health problems. Those skills and those competencies are certainly important. But the basics of pedagogy, of*

*the methodology of working with such a child are also crucial. We need a multi-faceted approach. (D17F3)*

*I still believe that SENA shouldn't be assigned strictly to a single child. When the child is not there, it would be much more valuable to the facility if s/he could work with someone else. (D5F1)*

There were also different approaches among the interviewees to the next category distinguished, i.e. the scope of the training, understood here as its extensiveness/extent. This was related to the expectations towards the assistant and the vision of the scope of his/her duties – whether s/he would be a person ‘assigned’ to a single child only or rather ready to provide expert support to children with different kinds of individual needs. In view of the above, the positions of the participants in the interviews ranged from the belief that university-level training would be necessary (or at least highly desirable) (*it'd be great if these women had some kind of directional training or were in the process of studying. [D5F1]*) to the conviction that a (content-free) training focused on strategies for working with a child/student with a specific type of disability/special educational needs would suffice. At the same time, there were also ideas coming from principals that it would be beneficial to initiate a course of study specifically preparing for the profession of assistant for students with special educational needs:

*Perhaps also the education already at the universities could actually be directed towards SENAs as well. So that they would already have some set of skills in addition to these qualities of their character. (D6F1)*

Another category identified concerned the preferred form of training (remote or on-site). This was primarily commented on by the assistants themselves. Their preferences varied. Some of them explicitly declared themselves satisfied with the possibility of remote course delivery, as it allowed them to combine their professional and family/social lives. This is illustrated by the following statements:

*The cool thing is that these trainings are online. I'm all for it, because it's also easier to balance it with work, with family somehow. (A21F3)*



*Well, the remote one [the form of classes preferred – author’s note]. Well, it suits me fine, especially as I have a small child and you can make it all work. (A24F3)*

As emphasised by the assistants, the remote format was not associated with any reduction in the quality of the training. Participant engagement could be just as high during online classes as during face-to-face classes:

*[...] for me, the course can be remote, as I was actively engaged in the course. I didn’t just turn it on and leave, I was focused, I took notes, I also had direct contact with the lecturer, I could ask questions, right, and we talked, the remote form is perfectly fine, although I’ll have training here... stationary, as far as first aid is concerned... first aid, exactly... I’ll have it in January, so it’s clear, it probably has to be stationary, yes. (A16F3)*

Respondents noted that the need to attend on-site training is not always advisable, as it sometimes poses various challenges – of an organisational nature both for the assistants themselves and for the functioning of the school/kindergarden. Here, assistants drew particular attention to the difficulties involved in reaching the training venue:

*[...] now I have training in Bytom on Saturday and Sunday too, it’s extremely far for me, I’m already worried, roads being what they are... I hope that... I’ll get there. (A18F3)*

By contrast, some SENAs commented on the need to participate in on-site training, as it satisfies the need for contact with another person, allowing for easier interaction and much more effective learning. One of the assistants, for example, expressed her disappointment at not being able to participate ‘live’ in the study visit to the school in Łajski:

*I’m the kind of person who likes to have direct contact with people, not computers, so for me, it was a pity that we didn’t have, for example, the stationary one in Łajski, that we couldn’t see what it looked like there, on the spot, but only... well, we listened, we observed it all... (A19F3)*

In conclusion, the discussions during the focus interviews revealed that assistants perceived advantages and disadvantages of both the on-site and online formula. With the former, they tended to cite greater efficiency as the main advantage, and with the latter, convenience. This is illustrated by statement from A2F1:

*I mean, I found the online ones certainly more convenient, although, [...] when there was the COVID and as far as my studies are concerned... well, so to speak, the online ones are, in my opinion, still qualitatively inferior to the ones that are held now, that there are meetings, that we have contact with the teacher, that we work in groups, and that we can exchange experiences, ask the teacher questions on a regular basis... [...] we are actually in these classes or these training courses of ours, and here [during remote classes – author’s note] we are, however, at home, at home, where... well, at my place, for example, there are kids, at someone else’s, I don’t know, there could be mum, dad, siblings, various distractions, so to speak, which... well, they’re not conducive to focusing, strictly on... on this training.. (A2F1)*

The next specific theme related to the timing of the training sessions. In this area, the largest number of respondents, among principals, teachers, parents, and assistants themselves, stated that the SENA training cycle should take place before they start work. Assistants were the most frequent speakers here. Significantly, the same view was shared by those assistants who had already received most of their training prior to employment, as well as those who had only received a small amount of training prior to employment:

*[It’s good that] there had been a lot of training sessions before we started our work; yes, it was like a week of intensive training sessions that I attended and [...] that basically introduced me to... How do I behave as a SENA, right? What I should be familiar with, how I should... what rules to put in place at work, yes, what... I mean, how do I know my way around the job. (A16F3)*

*[...] it’s nice that these training sessions were organised just before employment, because firstly, you could recollect some things, refresh your memory,*

*and secondly, some of the things were completely new... directly related to SENA, so it's very nice, I have a very positive opinion of them. (A23F3)*

*[...] it's nice that it had happened before we started this work, that we were, so to speak, more or less prepared for what we could... what we might expect, what we can and can't do, what our competences are, ok, I believe that's very important, so that later on we wouldn't be surprised by the fact that the job looks somehow different from what we imagined, yeah, that's basically it. (A21F3)*

Likewise, principals who felt responsible for employing qualified staff emphasised that they would prefer a member of staff to come to the school/facility with full professional qualifications already in place. As one principal noted:

*They [training sessions – author's note] should've been done before... where a fully qualified person gets employed and consequently, there won't be any problems. (D22F4)*

According to those interviewed (in particular, assistants and principals), when it comes to the optimum timing of training sessions, it is also important to plan them in such a way that the assistant can benefit from them during his or her free time, so that sufficiently early notice from the training organisers makes it possible to find a substitute for a SENA for this time or to organise the activities in such a way that the assistant's presence is not necessary.

### 3.3.3. Competence profile and tasks of a teaching assistant

The interviewees (principals, teachers, assistants, parents) highlighted a number of competencies they consider relevant when employing an assistant for a student with special educational needs. The analysis of the collected material allows the postulated competences to be divided into three basic groups:

**Personal competences** (e.g. empathy, sensitivity to others, tolerance of differences, openness to others, temperamental traits, resistance

to stress, assertiveness, ability to set boundaries, confidence in expressing one's opinions, self-reliance in making decisions, positive approach to one's work).

**Communicative competences** (e.g. ability to talk to diverse groups of people, willingness to establish communication with children, parents, teachers, professionals, ability to reach consensus, receptiveness to other people's views, readiness to cooperate with others).

**Task-related competences** (i.e. ability to perform specific tasks, e.g. care activities specifically adapted to the child's disability/disorder, ability to solve problems independently, ability to plan and organise work individually).

The project assumptions further distinguish three groups of competences: psychosocial, organisational and communicative competences. Psychosocial competences overlap with personal competences and task-related competences partially overlap with organisational competences. They are all important, although – as the interviewees stressed – it is quite difficult to be tested at the recruitment interview stage, especially when the candidate for the assistant position is not known beforehand:

*Even during the initial interview like this, I don't know... When wanting to hire or wanting to get to know the other person, does everyone check what social competences they have? And communication skills? Because for me, this is the priority at the moment [...] So I wouldn't change anything here, as far as this catalogue of competences is concerned. However... I don't know [...] It's very difficult to verify this in the case of people you don't know. (D18F3).*

Among the most frequently mentioned competences, the following were the most important according to the respondents:

– **empathy**

*And this empathy too. That kind of insight into the fact that I'm not the only one who's right. But I also have to listen to the other person. And the child and also the other teacher. Learning from each other here. And I think that's exactly it... (D24F4)*

*I think [...] it's all about very soft skills. It's not even about sound knowledge, it's more about the relationship, the bond [...] It seems to me that this is crucial, because knowledge at this level, as we discuss it, primary school, doesn't require any... high level of knowledge in terms of subject competence. Here, it's more about the child feeling supported, having a friend by their side. Someone they can always turn to, someone they can talk to, someone who likes children, someone who knows it and is genuinely committed. Someone who's not only interested in the child, but who's also interested in the child's family environment, so that there's close contact with the family and so that the family receives support, too. I feel that way, because it has to be the whole team. The whole team to make it work, to make the children function properly. That's what I think. I see how these two ladies, the ones I have with us, it's just something like that. Such a very big openness, such kindness, such attentiveness, such focus... Not that she's looking at her phone the entire time, for example. It's just really there and there's that relationship, there's that bond, it's the child who feels they are being supported. (N3F4)*

*[...] empathy comes first, of course, ok? Because it's such an important skill to be able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. It seems to me that in a profession like this, that's the foundation. (R3F1)*

#### **– resilience to stress and patience**

*When being hired, the assistant thinks s/he can handle it. And they have to be resilient to stress, to challenging situations. And they have to be able to manage. (D4F1)*

*Yes, it has to be a person who's, first of all, nice, calm, warm towards these children, patient, because a lot of patience is needed at times. It can't be some kind of a hot-headed person, or nervous, or sort of abrasive, so... well... a lot of patience is needed in this kind of work, truly a lot, so... Someone who comes from the street, even someone who has had contact with children, even healthy ones, and now there are (?) autistic children or those with various other illnesses, well, you have to approach such a child*

*in a slightly different way than a healthy child, so [...] ... it's not necessarily about working with children, but... it's just that you have to keep calm and be patient with the child. (A18F3)*

*Patience, because here you simply have to have as much patience as the ocean. Not even a sea, but an ocean. A person needs to possess that kind of energy. It seems to me that it goes together with this patience... because day after day after day, right? And [...] on the one hand, this patience, on the other hand, the energy. Because when we have energy [...], certain kind of joy inside us, we infect others with it... And these children can sense it. They feel that you want to be with them, don't they? (R3F1)*

– **creativity**

*I think it's very important to have such an open mind. Such a sharpness of mind. Because that's the lady I have and I appreciate her a lot for that. Before I say anything, she already knows what to do. And she knows who she has to help, what to do with a girl, with a boy... She's so bright and I appreciate her a lot for that. I kept thinking that experience, since I'm an older, experienced teacher... That experience is probably the most important thing at work. But there are these young people who are really, truly fit for the job of helping. And in fact, not just to help, because they know how to do a lot of really important things. (F4N3)*

*As far as I'm concerned, the assistant has to be a creative, flexible person, who adapts to the situation, doesn't fall into a pattern. But before acting, they think more extensively. And it definitely has to be a person who's able to work with others, I may not sound nice, but without overstepping boundaries, i.e. without interfering in the competences of the instructor, but rather following him or her [...] So a person who's flexible, creative, with this sensitivity and who's also adapted to the child's needs. (N6F4)*

– **independent decision-making**

*She participates in these activities and sees who needs some help. Often, M. sits, or by W. Or a little bit on the side and observes it. So it's on the fly, she always tries to tell us everything. And during English lessons I never have*

*to tell her anything, that she has to do something. She knows everything, what she has to do and when. (N3F1)*

– **open-mindedness and flexibility**

*If I imagine myself hiring an assistant, what do I need to see in them? Certainly, first of all, whether s/he knows or is willing to learn about this work that s/he'll be doing and about this child. Second, whether s/he, it was in knowledge, skills categories, whether s/he's communicative, whether s/he's going to take the students seriously in a partnership, not as objects, that s/he's going to guide them; i.e. s/he has to act in terms of "this needs to be looked into," well, and when it comes to attitude, s/he has to be absolutely ethical in his/her conduct, know the rules, care about them, and be fair and critical of both himself/herself and the child. Something that is inadmissible, for example, is that they can't be a sphinx, they can't do favours and they can't just wait. S/he must live, ask about things and seek solutions and contacts. (D9F2)*

*Such a person should be empathetic, open-minded, creative, interested primarily in what's going on with that child in the kindergarden, what's happening around them. Like with us – so that it's the children who are interested in her and that she's interested in them, so this relationship exists. She's with us from 7am to 3pm, she works with us all the time, she spends time with us. So that's it. It's vital that she has that willingness to cooperate and that she knows how to create a bond. That is the key to success these days. (F4N8)*

– **setting boundaries and assertiveness**

*The empathy that my colleagues mentioned, well, it's obvious that it's necessary. But also the ability to assertively set boundaries, both for the child and the parent [...] I'm not talking about building the Great Wall of China, I'm just talking about boundaries, which let us know that we set rules up to a certain point, and what's important for me, the consequence of actions. So that we don't have situations like this, and we also discussed this with our assistants, so that we don't have a situation where today I'm*

*your brother, and tomorrow I'm going to require things from you, because we have adopted some rules, principles. (D14F2)*

*As for my mum, well, to be honest, I've had to set those boundaries a bit. And I personally have to stick to them a lot. Mum requires constant communication: text messages, phone calls – day in, day out, text messages at half past eleven at night, because there's some problem. Although it's not really an emergency. It's often like that: < ah, you know, I don't know, he's kind of depressed, he doesn't want to go to school > and so on and so forth. Or: < ah, you know what, my daughter is feeling under the weather > and then there's explaining all sorts of things about the family. It's not specifically about the student that I'm interested in, it's just some family stuff that I don't necessarily want to know and it's not essential for my work. (A8F1)*

**– communicative skills and ability to cooperate**

*The ability to listen – that's for sure [...]. I don't know, the ability to communicate, to build some kind of relationship there, so that they're also not... so that we're not seen as this necessary evil and really not treated like... "It's my duty to [...] come to these classes." (A23F3)*

*Well, the assistant has to be open to cooperation with parents and teachers, because sometimes s/he can focus exclusively on the child and that's it. But it also has to be that openness and support from our side, even more so for beginners. Because they can become excellent one day, but sometimes the situation can be paralysing for them. At times, even experienced teachers are unable to handle it. Because the child needs special care, support. And that kind of collaborative relationship with teachers and assistants, that's where you have to work together. S/he has to cooperate with the parents, because psychological help doesn't stop at educational institutions [...]. Well, s/he needs to have such communicative skills, which is important especially in relations with children. The child can't be isolated in the group, because the main objective is often to teach children these relationships with their peers. Because it's often very difficult for them. They're not able to establish these relationships naturally, like their peers do. This is where*



*this help comes in. An assistant like this should be able to establish such communication with everyone. That way, the cooperation between all of them works out well. (D4F1)*

*To follow this kind of united front, but if we see that something is wrong, we don't communicate it with a hammer. We discuss it, and we exchange information, of course not in the presence of the child. And certainly not in the presence of the parent, but we meet on what we would call neutral ground. And we get along. That's what we have our coordinator for, that's what we, the principals, are here for, to maybe participate somewhere, to mediate somewhere, to cooperate. (D14F2)*

– **ability to adapt activities to the child's needs, age and disability**

*I think it's definitely important to know this child's dysfunction. An assistant has to know how to support this child, right? Because if someone can't hear... well, they have to know how to operate, I don't know, a hearing aid? Equipment? If someone has problems with walking, then they need to know how to operate a wheelchair... That's one thing. Second, they need to know what stage of development the child is at, if a child should be able to more or less speak at the age of 3 or 4, use 30 or 40 words, or even more, I can't remember... Well, they should be aware of that (R9F30); And they should be able to put themselves in the child's situation [...] That they can adapt, understand, they can't be too lenient either, [...] well, they should probably be able to motivate them to act, encourage them to do something they think is impossible, yet it does work sometimes. (R8F3)*

According to the respondents, some of the competencies needed for the profession of a special educational needs teaching assistant result from qualities and experiences acquired before starting the job. Others were developed/strengthened by the training offered by project representatives as well as by the support offered by individual establishments. Some interviewees emphasised that in their schools/kindergardens they also worked towards motivating the assistants, helped them to extend their competences by providing additional materials or talks with specialists (psychologist, educator, speech therapist). Such continuous moulding of the employee,

learning from each other and supporting each other in the school/establishment is an important part of team building. One principal describes measures to improve the competences of her assistant as follows:

*And there was constant motivation on my part and when we had already agreed that we were writing the project and that she was just going to try to acquire these assistant skills, the girl simply withdrew at some point. So I had to take so many steps, motivational talks, but we managed, with the additional help from her family, and the elders. Because also the mother's dead, so here I had to involve family members. Because I felt sorry for her to get stuck somewhere. And these training sessions [...] sort of gave her strength. We discussed each subsequent one: what it was like, and so on and so forth. I was still sending additional materials. Besides, participating in these extra classes with Nataalka, i.e. contact with a psychologist and speech therapist. Where she acquired this professional language and these further communicative skills. Well, they made the girl function extremely well at the moment. And empathy, empathy again. It's just this fundamental quality that should be there. You simply have to like people in order to do this job. That is the key. (D24F4)*

Competences are generally shared by all assistants, but the necessity to pay special attention to the specific needs of the child/student is occasionally emphasised. It is essential to adapt to the individual emotional needs of a particular child under care:

*This boy has problems, emotional ones, he can shout very loudly. He's a high-functioning, very intelligent child. It's important for him to be hugged, accepted and loved, something the teacher, who has to take care of the entire group and prepare the children for school, couldn't do at that time. It's a huge advantage that there's both this assistant and this teacher's support. Everyone is different, with different characters, and personalities, but it's necessary to find that common ground for the child. (D6F1)*

Respondents also reflected on the entry requirements for assistant candidates. According to some (both principals and teachers or assistants), one condition that is not included in the competition requirements yet should

be taken into consideration is the candidate's experience in working with children, e.g. as a tutor, teacher's assistant, student placement, etc. Their experience of working as an assistant in establishments demonstrates that while an educational background is indeed not a prerequisite, previous experience in working with children can constitute an important factor in helping to select the right person for the assistant position. According to those interviewed, this greatly facilitates interaction, allows the assistant to verify his or her possible predispositions and skills, and increases the chances of developing a positive relationship between the assistant and the child/student:

*Our observation is that not all the people who come to be SENAs are suitable for this function. The person in our institution is quiet, she does such an ant-like job, i.e. taking care of this child, while we ourselves are exploring... The teachers are trying to introduce her to the process. We try to work out some methods with this lady. However, we take more initiative than she does. The early days were difficult, to get this recruited lady started in this work with a student who's a difficult child. We had these casual conversations with the local principals, who also have SENAs, that maybe it would be desirable to set this threshold of level of education here. That these people should demonstrate that education related to working with children. Experience in working with children. For we have a different market today and we are approached by all sorts of people. (D1F1)*

*Unfortunately, we had to deal with the wrong person being selected. First, we hired a lady for an aide position, she was supposed to be SENA. She began her training. Then it turned out that she was completely unable to work with children. Her personality was completely incompatible with what we would expect in a job like that. And we had to part ways. We were able to find a lady to replace her, who already had such experience, having worked in a kindergarden. She was very well suited to the role. And the other lady had previously worked for us as an aide. We knew she had a good rapport with children who needed support in different areas. Neither of these ladies has a university degree, but somehow these personality traits make up for it. I can tell by looking at both ladies that they are comfortable and both are continuing their education at the moment. (D4F1)*

*These conditions, which the project itself already stipulated, were very demanding. The objectives were clearly set there, and so were the personality aspects. However, not everything can be detected at first glance. You don't always find the right person for the job. I wouldn't put any major restrictions on this, apart from the fact that you must be experienced in working with children. Because we had a few problems here, especially at the beginning. Even if the person is willing but doesn't have this experience, they sometimes simply don't realise what they're signing up for. And there can be a bit of disappointment here from one side or the other, completely unnecessary. [...] We have a SENA who had no such contact nor education. And neither is she receiving education in this area. And sometimes it doesn't look good despite the intentions on that person's part. Sometimes things don't work out the way we want them to. As for me, I would add this condition. (D6F1)*

*It seems to me that any experience with children should be taken into account, for the reason that... I think that a person who's hired as SENA without any experience whatsoever in working with children, and s/he finds himself/herself, let's say, facing a severe case of autism or any other kind of disorder here, well... I think that such a person will find it very difficult in this job... I mean, I'm not even talking about commitment to the job, because they can be committed. Meanwhile, to progress somewhere, to overcome certain things that are related to the disease... Well, I think it can be very... very difficult... to find your place in a job like this. (A22F3)*

Our interviewees shared their experiences of the tasks that teaching assistants carried out for students with special educational needs in their institutions. Naturally, these depended on the diagnosis and needs of the individual child/student and the educational stage the child/student was pursuing. These included: assistance with mobility, assistance with health needs and self-care or toileting, support with school activities (help with packing, writing down assignments), fostering relationships with peers, assistance in resolving conflicts, assistance with extracurricular activities and participation in school festivities and excursions, contact with parents,

assistance with communicating with others, motivation to work, support in independence and social skills training.

In addition to the individual needs of the child/student, factors that influenced the tasks carried out included the duration of the assistant's employment (whether full-time or part-time), job philosophy and the needs of the establishment. Some principals emphasised that the assistant was there not only to help the student/child to whom s/he was assigned, but in situations where s/he was absent or did not need this support, the assistant was to carry out other support tasks (e.g. assisting a teacher employed in the school's common room or helping other students who do not have a decision, but are in need of support).

At times, tasks that were defined raised some doubts among both assistants and teachers. Concerns were raised about the potential takeover of tasks by unauthorised persons. Peer-to-peer discussions, often involving principals, proved very helpful in this case.:

*So I gave the girls printouts... We discussed the range of activities. I made a diagram exactly like this: I drew who, what, how they communicated, and with whom. And that helped. By the way, the assistant herself had the same problem. For example, when entering the classroom at the beginning... there are classes with the psychologist, they're working... It made her feel uneasy. The same goes for the speech therapist, but it was only the first meeting. Later, when she saw that these people were so open to cooperation and didn't mind the presence of an extra person in these individual classes with N., after these, they got along well. And everything was ok from then on [...] The most important thing is to set the rules at the very beginning so that everything is clear. What is this for? What's the scope of action? Don't step into the teacher's competence and so on. These are these clear rules, they have to be established at the very beginning. (D24F4)*

*There was this moment with one of the ladies at the beginning that she was so charged with this knowledge, this kind of 'power' that you initially gave her with these training sessions. Just this incredible driving power of hers, this potency that she has and her mission. That there was this moment initially, that she was stepping into the authority of the teach-*

*ers a little bit. She wanted to seize on this little boy of hers, that he was hers and it's her responsibility. And there was a bit of a rebellion among my teachers: < ma'am, what's going on, who's responsible for him? > She didn't allow the parents to talk to the teacher, because she's the one to have that conversation. We had to explain it to each other, everyone has their own competence, everyone has their own thing to do; that was the start. But this intense charge, charged vision, of all that they have to do, just supercharged her so much that it was too much. So I talked to her and she's fine. It was more a question of awareness and having a talk. (D12F2)*

*One of my ladies, who had just finished her training and had no pedagogical training, charged with energy, charged with wanting to help at all costs, wanted [...] to look after the child. We know very well that over-protectiveness is sometimes more difficult to deal with than lack of care, and this was the case here. And it's a fact that after talking to the coordinator, because, apart from the fact that the director supervises, in my centre the coordinator of the activities of both specialists and assistants is an educational counsellor, a young, energetic person, but extremely approachable [...] it helped. (D14F2).*

The tasks set for specific assistants were related to the role our interviewees believed SENA was performing. The analysis of the focus interviews made it possible to identify three main roles of assistants:

1. "shadow" of the student/child
2. "companion/right hand" of the student/child
3. classroom/school aide

These roles sometimes overlapped, the boundaries between them were fluid, and their distinction was made based on the respondents' reflections and opinions on 'what is?' and 'what should be?' a good assistant for a student with special educational needs. According to the interviewees, the one role that would be predominant would largely depend on the needs of the individual learner and on the specific work of the institution in question.

According to the project's assumptions, the SENA should not be regarded as someone who relieves the child/student of his/her own classroom duties.

It's assumed that the role of the SENA is to gradually prepare the child/student to solve problems as independently as possible and to extend the field of autonomy.

The "shadow" assistant stays at the child/student's side, observes him or her closely and tries to assist where needed, while at the same time not taking over or imposing his or her vision of the task at hand:

*M. is by W's side all the time, when she eats breakfast, when she dresses, when we go for a walk. He controls her in some way, but it's also so that she doesn't take over everything. So that she can manage on her own. (N1F1)*

*When I looked at our assistant, I wondered why she was standing off to the side, observing him. And she gave me a great answer "Because I'm his assistant. I cannot relieve him of everything, do things for him." Only to point out, to guide him so that when he goes to school – and all indications are that he'll be deferred with us for the time being – so that he knows how to manage. (D6F1)*

The shadow assistant ensures the well-being not only of the child/student with whom s/he works, but also of the entire group in which s/he functions. S/he reacts and helps in situations that require it, becoming – as one principal describes it – 'the good spirit of the group'. This requires a high degree of openness and attentiveness to the needs of all members of the team:

*Because A. is with D. all the time, during breaks, she's behind him, she's his shadow. Nevertheless, this job is hard. [...] She was introduced as an assistant, but she doesn't function as an individual assistant, she functions in a group of specialists. Her opinion counts, she speaks up at teachers' meetings. I'll give you an example from D. There was a rather serious problem, it was about very unkind comments towards girls and when I talked to the students, the students told me that they had turned to A. with this problem and she knows everything. So, building this trust in the classroom is extremely important. This assistant is just such a good spirit of the group too, I can say that. I think that's a good term – the good spirit of the class. (D9F2)*

Being an assistant/shadow can sometimes stem from the fact that a student doesn't want to be perceived by his/her peers at school as someone who needs special support. Wanting to be treated the same as any other student, s/he finds it difficult to admit that s/he needs an assistant to provide help in various school activities. One assistant tells us about her experience:

*He's very ashamed... Anyway, there was an agreement with the parents right from the start in that, yes, I'll be there, but I'm this student's shadow. I'm not supposed to let the class know that I'm there for a particular student. There happen to be two of us in our classroom [...], my colleague has a girl, so... The mum was happy that... the work was divided. Maybe they won't realise? But it also looks like I'm sometimes standing as if against a wall anyway... Because, on the one hand, mum doesn't want the students to realise, on the other hand, the students also know her well... And it's often the case that I'm walking to school and somewhere on the way the mum will meet me and, of course, she explains this, this, this and this, because Michał this, Michał that, because Michał has a breakdown or something. And... And then I come to school and... I have to, so to speak, make up a story a bit. Well, because how am I supposed to know this mum? Yes, so it's a bit... Well, pretending that... I don't even know how to put it...? I am, because I am, I don't know, a helper? Well, yes, it was communicated, that we're not here for specific students, because we weren't supposed to let it be known that a specific student was under – that might sound bad: “under us.” Anyway [...] we were supposed to be there for everyone. And we try to help the class [...] He's just ashamed, he's embarrassed, he also pretends not to know me in the corridor, so... Well, if he's already looking for some kind of contact, it has to work that way, so that no one realises I'm with him. Well, I say, here's the problem. (A8F1)*

This reluctance to officially 'admit' to having an assistant may result, on the one hand, from a fear of being labelled and pinned as a 'student with special educational needs' and, on the other hand, from educational problems within the respective class unit.

Due to their medical condition or general functioning, some children/students with special educational needs require more help/support, often of



a physical nature. Without the presence and action of an assistant, normally, they would not be able to participate in lessons. In their case, assistants are referred to by respondents as a “companion/right hand,” a person virtually indispensable in most school activities:

*Basically, an assistant is necessary for her to function properly at school because she has a total disability of the lower limbs, but also a partial disability of the upper limbs, so she has muscle tension. She needs assistance with many aspects of her daily life at school. [...] In our case, it's even more than shadowing, it's accompanying [...], being the right hand. The girl is very capable intellectually, very independent, everything she can do, she does herself, but this assistant is necessary, for example, to turn on the water in the sink, because she's not able to do it herself; or to help her with her physiological needs. The assistant also spends all the breaks with her, so that N. is able, that is to say, she can move around in the school corridor, she is not restricted to the classroom. (D11F2)*

*This year I'm fighting to have these assistants' agreements extended. I'm going to have a child with an insulin pump where constant monitoring is required. Because this child's pump switches off when there's a sudden rise in sugar and doesn't switch on again. So it needs to be monitored all the time, and a person who's available is essential. I'll also have a child who suffers from impaired mobility, sitting up on his own, but not standing, not moving around on the floor, plus no swallowing of saliva at all. So there's a problem here too. All the time you have to control suction and so on. So, such a person is very much needed. (D22F4)*

*A SENA, who says “don't worry, I know what the homework is.” I mean, it's not such an educational role, because that's not what this lady's supposed to do, but it should go like this: “I'll help you take notes, I'll ask the lady, I'll lead you, it's all right if you haven't packed yet.” Looking after the student in this way. (N3, F3)*

“Classroom aide” – as referred to by respondents – has a broader range of tasks than those arising from the work as an assistant to a student with special educational needs. Such a role is frequently assumed by those as-

sistants whose students have a relatively high level of personal functioning and do not require constant attendance. Another reason for treating the assistant as a 'classroom aide' is when the child/student is not present during the assistant's tenure in the establishment:

*Simply by virtue of the fact that when a SENA comes to work and the child isn't there... she has to work the hours. She's at work, right? That's why she helps with other children. She doesn't just help those teachers who work with the child every day. She also contributes in the daycare. She works with that child until the child leaves by bus. But when the child goes at half past 1pm, she stays until 2pm. She helps the daycare teacher. (D3F1)*

*And when it comes to functioning at school, when he doesn't require this assistance, as it's not every minute of the lesson, the assistant helps the teacher with other students. Our SENA is also employed as a guardian during commuting. (...) She participates in all the school events, in the celebrations, in the projects we have. Also international ones, we're visited by guests. She participates in everything and helps out. (D18F3).*

*Our SENA takes over a lot of tasks related to care and work. As in other schools, our assistant helps the teachers, e.g. with decorations, in some classes or school evenings. She actively contributes to school life. (D16F3)*

Respondents emphasise that regardless of the age of the child/student, his/her health condition and state of psychosocial functioning, as well as the extent of the tasks assigned to the assistant, one extremely important factor, albeit difficult to verify straight away, is the mutual bond between the assistant and the child under care. Our interviewees describe this as 'chemistry', 'flow', 'similarity of characters', 'communicating without words':

*As I mentioned, you really have to develop contact with this child, it has to be smooth. Because if it's not there, nothing will get done, because the child won't accept that person and may even be mean and everyone around will know the reason. So if someone has that kind of personality that they can fit in with the child and follow, but not cater to the child, but*

*just follow the child, then these are the perfect candidates for this position and, fortunately, I have one. (D12F2)*

*It's all founded on a relationship and these assistants are wonderful because they are with our children, truly are there for our children. They know each other, they grow to like each other after a while, sometimes they already communicate without words... (R3F1)*

*I think the fact that they like each other and that they have very similar energy, that they have a lot in common, made the biggest difference in our case. I don't know if it's possible to pair people up like that. In our case, it worked out well. I think it would be very difficult for a quiet person to be with a child who's constantly running from wall to wall, so in our case, the energy is pretty much at a similar level. These are very difficult things to verify, because if you don't get to know someone, it's hard to predict whether you're going to like someone. I know it's a job, I understand that, but the thing with children is that sometimes they will say from the moment they walk in that this person is not cool and nothing will really work. If the child finds the assistant likeable, things will go a lot easier. But I don't know to what extent it's possible to verify this beforehand. (R10F3)*

From the point of view of parents of students with special educational needs, it is of the utmost importance that the assistant likes this job and accepts their child. They repeatedly point out that without the presence of a positive attitude towards the child and a real desire to support him or her, even the best training will fail to have the desired effect:

*Also, the assistant must have a big heart [...]. Without that, I don't know, whatever training [...] he might have, he simply has to want it too, right? Because the child will sense it and it can happen even after the best of training. And no, he won't cooperate well [...]. (R6F2)*

*[...] So that the assistant has this kind of heartfelt approach to the child. Because without this heart, it's rather cold... This care, this learning, this help in general... Well, surely with some experience too, right? It doesn't matter if it's with other disabilities... Well, with some knowledge in general,*

*so that s/he would also know how to behave with such a disabled child in case something happens. Because this is also important. (R2F1)*

Another element mentioned by the surveyed project participants was the often required and expected availability of the assistants. The nature of the work requires a high degree of irregularity – sometimes it means accompanying during lessons or classes, sometimes staying with the student after school or going on trips:

*She stays longer. She doesn't have a family yet, she has time and also, well, she has few activities... So she's happy to participate in some extracurricular activities, as I said, trips, evenings, at different times. She's also employed part-time, for 5 hours – as many hours as a child has at school, so she's employed for 5. But sometimes, if she needs to, she turns up, at different times she comes in, when the student is here. We work in two shifts, so sometimes a group comes at 10.30, so she arrives too, and there are as many hours as there are children in school. So, she's available in terms of time. We're very pleased with that. (D16F3)*

Aware of the high demands placed on assistants and the often very low remuneration incommensurate with the effort put in, some respondents point to the need to support the assistants themselves:

*We also have to take into account that this SENA is also an ordinary person who, well, in my case, it's a lady who's of a certain age, who has her family, who has own children and who also needs to be supported... Because this job is far from being light and easy. You're faced with certain demands, what the child expects from you, what the teachers expect from you, and then there's the parent, who has their own opinion as to which direction the assistant should take. On top of that, there's still the employer and within a SENA we still have these whole project assumptions. So when hiring this person here, you really have to think long and hard, because it's a collaboration, let's be honest – it's not just a project. Because I know that my student will continue to depend on this person, and I know that I have hired a good person, because I can see the results. But it's necessary to positively reinforce these assistants, because there are moments when*

*my teacher comes a little bit defeated, not so much in terms of contacts with the child, because cooperation with the child is great, but with the parents. (D20F3)*

To sum up, the variety of tasks and high expectations placed on the assistant require not only a good and responsible match between the assistant and the student/child, but also constant monitoring of the assistant's work, the reaction of other staff to crises and support. As one principal put it, a good assistant should be able to 'tame' the child/student s/he will be working with:

*However, as for the work itself, a quote from *The Little Prince* comes to mind. That to tame is to make yourself responsible for someone. A bit like in this SENA-child relationship here. (D4F1)*

Being prepared to be flexible and taking a subjective approach to the assistant's job also seems crucial. If the assistant does not perform well with a particular student/child, it may be necessary to think it over – having used the necessary means of support – about changing the person:

*Because when choosing assistants, we also had in mind specific kind of approach to the child, this emotional sensitivity. Because that's what you have to have in case of children with special educational needs. This exceptional vigilance, because if this contact is not there, this cooperation won't work very well. The study visit I had the pleasure of participating in showed me that sometimes it's necessary to change the assistant because the cooperation between the child and the assistant doesn't go as planned. (D6F1)*

Continuous work towards the development of the necessary competences of the assistant, psychological and pedagogical support, clear definition of the tasks to be performed by the assistant, fostering cooperation between the staff of the educational institution and paying attention to the personal qualities of the assistant when matching the assistant with a particular student/child seem to constitute indispensable elements in creating the right working model that satisfies all the team members of

the establishment and provides optimum support for the student with special educational needs.

#### 3.3.4. Benefits of the assistance

Children with perceived difficulties in independent functioning in kindergarden/school as well as in communication were recommended for participation in the project. Difficulties may have originated from low social competences, as well as aggressive and/or self-injurious behaviour or behaviour that makes it difficult to function with other children/students. Difficulties could also have been caused by intellectual disabilities, chronic illnesses, mobility impairment, multiple disabilities, as well as autism spectrum disorders, etc. The challenges faced by the assistants surveyed were highly complex, as each child is unique, with specific needs and expectations and diverse predispositions. Each child required individualisation of the educational process and upbringing.

Participants in the group interviews were keen to share both their observations and experiences of working as a special educational needs teaching assistant (SENA). The voices of principals, teachers and assistants and mothers alike all emphasised the efficiency of the project:

*[...] This is a big help and we're very happy about it [...]. (D3F1)*

*[...] a SENA's help is invaluable (D16F3)*

*Let me put it this way: two weeks ago, my mother came in and cried. She said she was grateful to everyone for the assistant [...]. (D18F3)*

*Assistant. This is probably the best thing that could've happened to us, something we've fought for for a very long time [...]. (R7F2)*

The majority of interviewees also expressed hope for the development of solutions to launch assistant services in kindergardens/schools:

*[...] If there was an opportunity, we would be very, very keen to prolong this project. We're very pleased. The entire community is thankful. (D24F4)*

The following section will outline the changes that have occurred as a result of the activities undertaken by a SENA. It must be clearly emphasised that these do not only concern the child/student with SEN who was supported by the assistant but also refer to those who function in the kindergarden/school space and his/her family. None of the narratives collected indicated a regression of the child's/student's functioning in the preschool or school environment. All of them reported positive changes as a result of the launch of assistant services.

The first area of analysis undertaken concerns the child/student supported by the assistant and the associated multifaceted changes in their **social and emotional functioning**. These were noted by everyone involved in the group interviews. Most frequently mentioned was the fact that the support provided by the assistant contributed to **an increased sense of security for the child/student**, which resulted not only in better coping with the demands of school or other extracurricular activities but, in many cases, was particularly conducive to overcoming anxiety and even aversion to kindergarden or school:

*[...] the SENA was influential in getting the girl to go to school at all. She isn't frightened by the school, she somehow feels at home there. Even though the SENA doesn't accompany her during lessons [...] (D21F3)*

*[...] she's safe at this school, also nothing bad can happen there, because there's this assistant who watches over her all the time like some angel [...]* (R2F1)

*[...] X wants to go to kindergarden. X does not have a problem at all with staying [in kindergarden – author's note]. (R9F3)*

The children's anxieties were especially emphasised by the mothers. The children feared rejection by peers or difficulty in performing simple, everyday activities that non-disabled peers usually have no problem with. As a consequence, the children avoided peers, and new situations as well as activities requiring active involvement. In several cases, it was not so much the assistant's help as the presence of the assistant that contributed to fulfilling the need for a sense of security and provided the motivation

to attend and/or become active in the establishment. Here are examples of such statements:

*[...] my daughter is finding her way around the world of school. Children, they are no longer a barrier for her. The time when she was afraid of everything was very difficult for us. (R7F2)*

*[...] She feels more confident, more secure, because she understands that she has the task done. [...] she generally works at a slower pace compared to other children. And she copes thanks to the assistant, he just helps her [...] if there are tasks that the children have to do, she looks at the assistant who notices that she's doing them well, she just feels more secure. [...] minimal progress is being made. (R5F2)*

Not only did assistance with various activities provide an incentive for the child to put in effort, but also promoted faster integration with peers. Through the assistance services, children related positively to the kindergarten or school environment. They became more adventurous and open to different activities. This is evidenced by the following statements:

*[...] the SENA mobilises her for this work, this automatically translates into grades [...] (D21F3)*

*[...] he knows that I'm there for him and that there's just no confusion that he doesn't know which lady is his, what he's supposed to do, where he's supposed to go and so on [...] (A1F1)*

*[...] The assistant sort of follows her, directs her where, how she should get, prompts her – yes – but doesn't do things instead of her (...) the assistant gives this sense of security. Because once, for example, the light just went out in all the toilets. She was [in the toilet – author's note] and she didn't want to go there for a while, to go to the toilet [...] and with the assistant [...] she feels safe. [...] she sort of functions like this? [...] like a walking angel [...]. (R6F2)*

Fulfilling children's need to feel safe contributed to solving numerous problems, not only educationally, but also in their upbringing. The emo-



tional and psychological security mentioned by the assistants and mothers, therefore, translated into **increased motivation to learn and involvement in the learning process**. Although school achievement was not measured using tests or other research tools, principals, teachers, assistants, and mothers observed progress in the acquisition of core school skills. In particular, this progress was noticeable in relation to reading, writing or numeracy. Children experiencing support and understanding from the assistant were more motivated to complete specific tasks. Each small success triggered a sense of satisfaction and boosted their self-esteem: “*He’s working and boosting self-esteem.*” (R10F3):

*[...] he [the student – author’s note] can ask me for help whenever he needs something. He sees that I motivate him too. [...] I keep an eye on him and he learns well, he’s the best in class.* (A9F2)

*Of course, she [the assistant – author’s note] doesn’t take the role of a support teacher, because she doesn’t have educational qualifications. But just the fact that she hints, nods, and pays attention to diligence is a great help. [...] [the teacher – author’s note] can take care of the class during this time.* (D16F3)

*This SENA persona is having a very positive impact on this girl. She’s hugely behind, she’s didn’t get a promotion. At the moment, she’s doing well in this group; she’s now making up for those delays from that neglect.* (D3F1)

*[The boy – author’s note] became more courageous thanks to this lady. [...] He became more courageous, and he went on a trip that he’d never wanted to go on before. [...] He never wanted to go into the room where the discotheque was held, but this year he attended together with the lady. The boy started to read, these simple words. He didn’t understand the instructions, so the lady explained everything to him. He keeps expecting confirmation of whether he has done it right. So the lady confirms it, he goes on ahead. Thanks to her, he does a lot of exercises. [...] On the one hand, he’s shy, but also noisy. [...] So he has calmed down, he no longer shouts so much, he is calmer. Before that, he used to use profanities, and the lady pays attention, she explains everything [...]* (D16F3)

*[...] Today, she was adding in memory, because she doesn't add in memory at all, she just draws lines. Today, she added two to fourteen from memory. Well, I was delighted that she was able to add it at all. It hadn't happened before. [...] she's been reading for a month now, so, she's starting to read, because until now she hadn't read at all. So it's all positive [...]. (A12F2)*

*[...] well, you can see that there's amazing progress [...] her daughter is writing much better, well, they're doing a lot more competitions like this. Even recently, the daughter's participated with this assistant in some international competition [...] (R2F1)*

*X is also starting to count, he's starting to recognise letters, so this education has really progressed here [...] He can also stack blocks properly, because he didn't really know what the toys were for, which is also a result of his family situation. (D10F2)*

The assistant's support frequently contributed to the child's/student's better performance in class. Students with SEN concentrated more on the task at hand or other school activities. With the assistant's help, children/students found it easier to complete assignments, complete lesson notes, or catch up on missed work. This is confirmed by the following statements:

*Also, it's just my X who has a problem during lessons, it's hard for her to take notes or write down or complete assignments. She simply needs more time for certain things, so this is where my person helps her with this, and I can see that it produces positive results. Because even this free time or breaks, X is happy to stay in class. We take notes together, fill in the gaps, and the next day, she's happy that she's not behind and that the day has gone well for her [...]. (A14F2)*

*[...] Well, it's a great improvement, superb, he's keeping up, so far he's keeping up with the programme, with the other children, there's this assistant, he's not getting lost, he's helped with everything, so here, yes, it's mega positive. I'm very happy. Hopefully, it will continue. (R7F2)*

In many cases, the assistant's help and support has also helped the children to **become more independent** and complete tasks they were previously unwilling or unable to do. The following statements attest to this:

*If it weren't for SENA, this boy who's in first grade, wouldn't be able to fully function in our reality. Not only does he not walk, but he also has problems with hygiene and self-care activities. The lady has already taught him how to fasten buttons and zip up, but hygiene activities always require assistance. (D20F3)*

*[...] we told the assistant that we had to prepare the boy for being independent. [...] The boy in the wheelchair was playing football on the pitch. And I think that's the point, isn't it? (D20F3)*

*[...] it changes every day and it's so great. [...] he's becoming increasingly independent, he knows how to get dressed, how to put his shoes on, before that he didn't show any initiative at all that he wants to do anything about it, and for me personally the most important thing is that he wants to walk with braces, because he has braces, he's been a braced child since he was one, [...] she has succeeded in that he wants to play with others, he wants to sit at the table with others, he wants to eat with others, he wants to give, I don't know, hold other children by the hand and most importantly he wants to talk to them. (R9F3)*

*[...] When it comes to using the toilet, we had a huge problem here too, because the student couldn't perform such a simple activity as washing his hands. He would take off his blouse to wash his hands, he would take off his jumper, so you know how long it took, the teacher couldn't leave the whole group to attend to X either, now we don't have that problem anymore. The assistant goes to the bathroom, without going into the cabin, of course, but supervises, as it were. When he leaves, he's shown how to wash his hands, how much soap to take, [...] all the rules we should instil have been learnt. He's also able to use the accessories himself, things that are used, e.g. in the classroom. (D10F2)*

Another major change was the **improved communication** in the children/students supported by SENA. Some of them presented a lack of ability to initiate and sustain conversation despite a good mastery of speech and language. The assistants motivated the children to express their needs and initiate communicative situations. However, in cases where the child did not speak, they taught them simple words or substitute messages. Having the child communicate what they wanted to say gave them not only a sense of understanding but also a sense of belonging to the group. Good group or classroom relations fostered the development of communication with peers. This is evidenced by the following statements:

*[The child – author’s note] was withdrawn and had difficulties in establishing relationships, with communication. Thanks to SENA, there are more and more of these relationships, and new words appear. Willingness to communicate not only with an adult, but also with other children. Simply put, the child’s self-confidence grows thanks to SENA. These social relationships in the classroom expand [...]. (D19F3)*

*[...] He names all the emotions, the urges. His awareness is more developed, so he has been talking a lot for the last few months about his emotions, about needs, about what X gives him, and about the fact that it’s easier for him to express himself in front of the group. Because it was hard for him, even in such spontaneous matters. I have ideas for fun, but I won’t tell anyone since no one will understand me anyway. Even with things that are so obvious to other children – it was difficult for him. He says that it’s easier for him now, not only the school stuff, but also the social interactions, playing, also speaking, which was difficult for him. [...] He’s now more eager to join a group, although it’s still that time when he’s looking for an adult to be in a one-on-one interaction. He may not be at the same level of verbal activity as the other children yet, but there’s no longer that barrier [...]. (R10F3)*

*[...] when it comes to the support my son is receiving, it’s basically about these social relations and work organisation [...] that it’s all built on relationships and that these assistants are wonderful because they’re with our*

*children; specifically with our children. They know each other, they grow to like each other after a while, erm, sometimes they already communicate without words [...] it certainly is a good influence and has an impact precisely on the relationship with peers, comments, erm, it mitigates these situations, and well, it also helps to resolve conflicts [...]. (R3F1)*

Assistants worked to **develop children/students' competences in order to help them function effectively in a group** and cope with everyday life in a comprehensive way:

*In terms of our student's functioning now, that he's just received the support of an assistant, we see a tremendous improvement in his functioning because this lady who looks after him implements and repeats all the rules that X should conform to, and you can actually see this positive change [...]. (D10F2)*

*[...] and with our X (assistant – author's note), she looks at us and, I don't know, immediately knows that she has to say good morning via the communicator because she has a smartphone on her neck [...]. (R6F2)*

*He finally remembers the names of the children in his group [laughs]. Because before, it wasn't important to him, he didn't remember, he didn't pay attention, well, because he didn't play with them, because he assumed that this relationship wasn't there anyway, [...] but finally, these children become important, and they are partners to have fun with, they start to be relevant, because he also started to be important to them as a participant in the fun [...]. (R10F3)*

The assistants were able to accurately recognise the needs of the students under their care and adapt their activities to them. Children/students found it easier to establish peer relationships and participated more actively and courageously in teamwork or games. As a result of the assistants' support, their **functioning within the peer group** improved:

*[...] Surely, looking at these kids' social behaviour, it has improved. Some of them were withdrawn because of their – how should I put it – being different – they didn't want to get involved. But now peer relations have*

*improved a little. I'm not saying that they are perfect, but you can see that improvement. (D24F4)*

*It's really beautiful, and I think it's been a huge success [...]. This school community has accepted that we have, that we're just different, and that doesn't mean someone is better, someone is worse. I hope it just keeps going in that direction. (D11F2)*

*[...] my daughter used to be very withdrawn, quiet and polite, even when we started in kindergarden, they even thought she didn't speak, right? Because she didn't say anything, so it was only when we got an assistant in the kindergarden that we had a breakthrough. Here, this kind of motivation to play with other children, because although she liked it, she used to withdraw, there was this fear somewhere [...]. (R7F2)*

*[...] my daughter doesn't feel as disadvantaged as other children. She's healthy, right? Because she's able to go everywhere with this assistant, just like these healthy children. She can take part in competitions, even sports competitions, despite her physical disability. Because there's always an assistant there to make sure she doesn't suffer any unfortunate falls and so on, so it's really great. I have it, and it's really needed, isn't it? (R2F1)*

*The help is amazing because X can take part in activities just like other children, maybe not to the same extent [...], but certainly her functioning is greatly facilitated this way, right? Because she also does a lot of things more slowly, like getting around the room, or now at school, because she's in second grade, but also on trips. However, it's a constant care to, I don't know, give her water or help her, I don't know, in the shop, but it's a problem to lift some things with outstretched arms, so this assistance is amazing, isn't it? [...]. (R4F2)*

*[...] Here, it's very difficult to connect with the children. Sometimes, at the very beginning of my work, when I began observing the child under my care, I noticed that she had a great desire to approach her friends and classmates, but she had barriers that she couldn't overcome on her own. And that's when we started talking a lot, getting to know each other, and*

*little by little, X and I began to break the ice. [...] She's also beginning to initiate contact with her peers. It's true that I have to be present during conversations or on outings, but I can already see that X is simply beginning to trust her friends more. This barrier is already starting break [...]. When I see that my student opens up, she starts to seek contact with her peers on her own [...]. (A14F2)*

*On the other hand, I can see that now this isolation is starting to reverse a little bit, that these kids have a good relationship. And I can see that these children are also increasingly willing to interact with X of mine. [...] You can see little steps of development. But something good is happening, and I'm starting to notice this good relationship with peers, maybe not right now. Not sure how quickly it'll happen, but slowly, for now, baby steps. (A13F2)*

The individualised support of the children/students provided by the assistants constituted a major factor leading to **changes in their behaviour**. Principals, teachers and assistants recalled previous aggressive or self-aggressive behaviour on the part of their students. Through careful observation of the children/students and a deep insight into their needs and capacities, the assistants gained knowledge to prevent behaviour that might be difficult for the other students:

*[Assistant – author's note] who's well aware of both his illness and its specifics, and stays in close contact with his mum [...]. (D15F2)*

The assistants had a positive influence on the activity of the children under their care. Mid-morning breaks and calming techniques proved useful in this respect:

*[...] It has improved by 180 degrees. In my case, you can also see it from the point of view of the principal's office, because he was with me every day. (D18F3)*

*[The teacher said earlier that – author's note] X plays alone and that he does not want to play with the children in the group, that he does not know how to play, that he takes away toys, that he does it, let's say, aggressively.*

*Because he can take a toy forcefully from another child, and if the child doesn't want to give it to him, he could throw a punch. [...] the moment Mrs X started working there, this problem didn't disappear, but it's not visible when she intervenes promptly and the whole situation gets resolved [...] at this point, she's able to invite her friends to play together, and she can hold hands when they go to the dining room, for example, she can share. So, it's great. (R9F3)*

*Teachers report that thanks to these afternoons with SENA, the boy has become calmer and resorts to profanity less frequently. It's not only socialisation activities that are here but also educational ones. And the effect is positive. (D21F3)*

*[...] since the assistant has been around, she's been very polite, she's so calm, relaxed, and smiling and thank goodness there hasn't been this attack. (R7F2)*

Another example of the positive effects associated with assisting children/students was the **overcoming of barriers that prevented them from performing certain activities** due to the health condition of the child/student concerned. Then, the assistants supported the children under their care in various activities, creating the conditions that enabled them to participate or function better as part of a group. For example, supporting a child by helping him or her to use a hearing aid or assisting with medical activities related to a chronic illness:

*[...] Because, even the operation of the hearing aids and the like, erm, it's not a problem, there was no problem at all [...]. Ms X, who puts the hearing aids on him, watches over him, it's X who goes to the kindergarden with the hearing aid, comes back from the kindergarden with the hearing aid [...]. Thanks to this apparatus and the fact that Ms X watches over him, it's a bit easier for him [...] from day to day, it all changes from day to day. It's not that it lasts for weeks, it's just that I see that one day he comes from the kindergarden and he tells me stuff, and he speaks very little, he has a very big problem with speaking [...]. (R9F3)*



*Really, the presence of a SENA for a chronic disease such as diabetes is essential here. (D15F2)*

Assistants helped children/students to get around the kindergarden/school area and to perform hygiene activities:

*[...] My daughter has general muscular flaccidity, so she needs help with physical activities such as visits to the toilet, or, or with gymnastics, which is why we have been working with an assistant since kindergarden. Apart from that, she develops correctly, so the assistant isn't necessary for the learning itself. (R4F2)*

*[student – author's note] is in the wheelchair, but he also has orthoses. He's not a big boy yet, so the assistant takes him in his arms when necessary. [...] We have the toilet prepared. But as I said, these physiological activities... well, he doesn't even feel it. He has diapers, there's a dedicated changing table prepared and the SENA takes care of it. [...]. (D20F3)*

*The girl here has problems with her lower limbs and there's a problem with walking. This is why there's assistance to climb the stairs. Our building is really from 1964, it's one of the old schools built as part of the education programme. It's been extensively renovated, but unfortunately, the building has such a design that we were able to afford wheelchair ramps outside, two wheelchair lifts on the ground floor, yet there's no such option for the first and second floors. So, just this fact that there's an assistant who helps our student with getting from one floor to the other, from the changing room which is actually in the basement; she helps her to carry her schoolbag, for example, is a big deal. The girl is very independent, and tries to do everything by herself, sometimes even protests that we want to help her. However, being aware of these deficits in her ability to move faster, the assistant is really justified here. (D14F2).*

Interview participants stressed the importance of the relationship that formed between the children, the assistants and the mothers. The work of the assistants was highly appreciated by the principals and teachers as well as by the mothers. The assistants' commitment to their duties was

particularly acknowledged. None of the narratives obtained mentioned the child's lack of acceptance of the person of the assistant:

*So very good contact with this support assistant. I'm extremely satisfied with it. [...]. (R5F2)*

*[...] When X comes to school, there's this knowledge that someone is there to listen, to help and it's just like a soulmate. (A14F2)*

*They've got to know each other and have become friends to such an extent that Auntie X takes one look and points at something, for example, and X already knows what it's about, right? And it's great that she trusts her so much, that she opens up, she's so resolute, she guides her a lot. [...] Auntie is like a second mum to her [...] she certainly won't let anyone hurt her, if necessary, she'll shake her finger [...]. (R1F1)*

It's worth emphasising that occasionally, the assistant has acted as a kind of substitute for the absent father in the family:

*[...] it's a man, and I'm raising boys on my own and there a man was needed here, and X was always looking for this man among the people who conduct the classes. And here the school also sensed very well that X needed it, that this male energy here and that X needed this male support [...]. They're actually very similar, I mean, the assistant's very sporty and my son is very sporty, so they have a lot in common and quite similar energy. So they get along really well together, just on a human level, so friendly. He's viewed by X more like a friend. I don't want to say buddy or mate, because it's a completely different relationship, but such a more friendly support than the support of a teacher who has this task and this job. So that's how he treats him, more like an adult friend. (R10F3)*

The second area concerns the peers of children/students with SEN. **Sensitising them to the special needs of their peers** made them increasingly appreciative of their uniqueness/value and more proactive in establishing friendly relationships with them:

*The moment X got his assistant, he started to function in a completely different way. Also, in the classroom, everyone started acting in a completely different way... In general, these classroom educational processes started to progress in a stable, regular manner. If there's any crisis, X is under the constant care of an adult [...]. (D15F2)*

The presence of an assistant in the classroom also ensured that peers gained support and guidance. The assistants were able to recognise the various needs of all the children/students present in the classroom and to use discipline in difficult situations:

*Naturally, they understand a lot more. They just have a lot more of, so to speak, this help provided. Both the healthy ones and those involved in this project. So it's not that this SENA is dedicated to just one child. It's for the entire group. And he does an excellent job in this position. It really is an invaluable help. (D22F4)*

*[...] For example, during breaks... because I connected really well with his peers, and I wanted them to like me and for him to get something out of this mutual interaction, so when someone from his class comes up to me and says "how are you?," "how was your weekend?," he's next to me, he listens, listens, listens. I reply, they say something [...] he's socially very distant. (A7F1)*

*[...] I have to point out that she's there not only to help this one girl. If it's necessary, she helps other children as well. When a child is absent, she still attends the class and helps all the children there. When the zero grade finishes classes at 1 or 12.30pm, the lady goes to the kindergarden class too and she's there for the children. It's not just during preschool activities. In this daycare it's also a big help for the teachers that work there. There's this influence; the assistant lady is very eager to provide this help [...]. (D3F1)*

*Because you can count on her to assist with various things. [...] Earlier, there were a lot of complaints from parents from this group, including a delegation of parents that came to see me. That if I don't do something about this student, they know where to go. For it was such outright de-*

*structive behaviour for that class. Aggressive behaviour, profanity, all sorts of things... In general, it destabilised the learning atmosphere there. And parents: "please do something about this child." And right now, there are no complaints. Let's just hope I didn't say it at the wrong time (laughs). But there aren't. So it's been a really positive influence. (D18F3)*

The third area refers to all **adults** who had direct contact with a child or student with SEN, not only in the kindergarden/school but also within the family. All the collected and analysed data indicate that the support of the assistant positively influenced the psychological comfort of mothers participating in the project as well as the comfort of the teachers. It can also be concluded that the assistant's services also proved beneficial to the parents of the peers, who took a more favourable view of the relationships in the classroom/group following the employment of the assistant.

**Mothers** whose children were provided with the assistant's support pointed to the psychological comfort they gained through it. They were able to devote more time to their professional and domestic activities:

*When there was no assistant, I wouldn't even let myself drive one kilometre to the shop because I was afraid I'd get a phone call. Go, you've got to go back, hurry and all. [...] It's kind of like a super aunt [...], so here I'm confident. Now I can peacefully... I don't know, go out, leave, or just switch off the phone for the sake of my peace of mind. Because I am sure that she's there and she'll take care of her [...]. Complete serenity. (R7F2)*

*[...] it's perfectly alright to have a coffee [...] it's these screams, panic attacks, hysteria, and now, there are, I don't know, like two different people, as my husband once said, how can it be that I'm sitting in an armchair drinking coffee just like that? It's because this coffee tastes normal at last and I don't have to wonder, I know X is looked after. (R6F2)*

*[...] I think the presence of a SENA and the fact that the mother knows that there's always a professional watching over her child give her such peace of mind that she can concentrate on her work. [...]. (D20F3)*

*I can also see that it has a positive effect on the parents. They feel more confident at school. Because the child feels better. You can notice it in parent's behaviour. SENA has a lot of information about the child and can pass this information on to other teachers who work with the child. (D19F3)*

*[...] the time she spends at school is a time when I have what you might call a break, a short break from this kind of anxiety because I know that she spends her time there in a very nice, friendly, collegial, safe way, and even if she has a problem with something, there's an extension of my helping hand there. I completely, totally trust the assistant. (R4F2)*

*[...] mother was really concerned about how X would cope in the fourth grade, because he's now in the fourth grade. She was afraid of it because she knew what situations there'd been before, that he was aggressive, that he shouted, that he... and all that kind of stuff, but so far so good... (A1F1)*

The mothers appreciated being partially relieved of the burden of looking after their child in an educational institution. They were grateful to the assistants for the fact that, thanks to their support, their children were becoming more independent and had the chance to learn in a mainstream institution:

*[...] I don't work, so I thought I could take care of it, and yet, when there's someone doing it. Well, after 10 years of looking after [a child – author's note], it feels like a very big relief, doesn't it? And also for him. It's easier for him in the group then, and we got the information from the school, X was enrolled there. X is enchanted with Mrs X in general, right? He is, Mrs X is kind of just like physical therapists for him, they're just, the most important people, aren't they? (R8F3)*

*[...] it's so calm, I think it takes the pressure off me, so I don't have to think about what's going on in the school, because I know he's being looked after, right? and I also know that he's not such a burden to others, right? Well, I am also aware that the ladies have just said that one person can make a whole group fall apart and that's true. (R3F1)*

*[...] if I had to check his notebooks, that is, this cloud, I don't know if I could [...]. (R8F3)*

**Regular contact** with the assistant was highly valued by all of the mothers. It enabled them to gain knowledge about what their children experienced at school/kindergarden and how they felt there. The assistants were also an **important source of information** that enabled the mothers to have a deeper insight into their children's problems and social functioning:

*[...] I'm very happy that this assistant is here. Well, first of all peace of mind, the fact that this child is sent to school, that it's safe to do this, right? That the child is not left somewhere in the corner and so on, because there's this other person next to her all the time [...]. (R2F1)*

*[...] not only are such people necessary for children, but also for parents, because we, as parents, can't know everything, can we, because we learn by trial and error, because each of us is trying to achieve something and what it might look like later on, and so on, and this assistant, I mean, maybe they've seen other cases, they've dealt with something like this and so on, so they can always offer their expertise, so I'm very much in favour of an assistant, ok? (R2F1)*

*[...] I'm in touch with the assistant almost every day, on the phone, so we know everything about what my daughter does at school, what she did at home, for example, what she said, if she didn't like this or that, so we're up to date here, and that's why I think this cooperation is excellent and it's not like there are four or five ladies and you don't know which lady did what with your daughter that day and so on, where to find out, and here we have one lady who knows everything and that's really very beneficial for the child. (R2F1)*

*I contact the assistant via Messenger, I'm being kept up to date about anything that's been going on in the group, any difficulties X has had, and anything that might affect his mood in the afternoon. On top of that, I get text messages about activities planned for the next few days in case my child fails to inform me. We feel very well cared for, and I feel this is accompanied by this great*

*affection and warmth towards X, but also this strong commitment on the part of the assistant. This contributes a lot to X's sense of security. (R10F3)*

*[...] established a regular hotline with the mother, so she's more at ease, not only in terms of education and upbringing but regarding a boy at the age of puberty [...]. (D8F2)*

*[...] Mum is overjoyed that she has this lady around. They have a good rapport, even though she's such a young person. [...]. (D16F3)*

*[...] Parents are provided with regular feedback from the school. Concerning the child's behaviour. As well as what the child has learnt, what they've covered, what they should remember, what they should bring. This organisational supervision of their presence at school. (D2F1)*

*[...] mum understands his disability, and this is where the assistant's important role comes into play, to talk to mum and guide her, her behaviour actually. Because there are things she doesn't understand and she does things, says things to the child that she shouldn't be saying. So here, the assistant is also an additional support. (D12F2)*

By being in constant contact with the assistants and especially by communicating with them on a regular basis, the mothers developed increased confidence in the teaching staff. This resulted in good cooperation between all parties involved:

*What's more, this project brought the girl's parents closer to us, because we agreed with the assistant that, if possible, there should be a daily update for mum or dad as they come in. And because at the beginning they were, well, not so trusting – you know how it is when you come to a new group in a new environment. [...] the cooperation with these parents is just phenomenal. (D24F4)*

Moreover, the parents of fellow classmates benefited from the services of the assistants. The assistants were able to positively influence the behaviour of children, encouraging them to integrate with children/students with SEN, thus **ensuring everyone's safety**:

*[...] And we're assisted in this regard. And also within the environment. We receive no complaints from other parents about this child. (D19F3)*

*[...] That sense of security for parents. Not just the ones here but others as well. Because parents are different, all people are, and sometimes they resent the fact that, for example, a child caused harm, scratched, or behaved inappropriately. But after all, we don't explain to everyone why this happens. There are no such comments from other parents. Complaints about their own healthy, fit child being in some kind of discomfort. Yes, considering these preschool groups, this is a major issue. But also this external image changes too, if we can say that we have this extra help. We have an extra person. [...] This additional help and support and an extra pair of eyes increase parents' sense of security. (D17F3)*

With the support of the assistants, teachers were able to **deliver the topic of a lesson** more effectively. Furthermore, the assistants contributed to the preparation of the necessary teaching aids:

*A SENA offers tremendous support to teachers. Especially in younger groups, where the teacher has a lot of work to do. The assistant prepares the aids, and organises the child's working space. (D19F3)*

The assistant was first and foremost

*[...] an **invaluable help** to the teacher [...]. (D16F3)*

*[...] it is an unquestionable advantage that we have help at all. [...] basically, we have a hundred children in the kindergarden and one lady to help. And at the moment... there are only two children with certificates, and we have more children with opinions. [...] In general, I applaud the idea that someone has recognised this need. [...]. (D17F3)*

*[...] There is one lead teacher, there's also the janitor, who's kind of in the group, but she also goes out sometimes, because she goes to the cleaning areas, as she has other duties, she has to prepare meals, serve, clean and so on... There's also a support teacher, but she's only there for four hours, and the children are at kindergarden for much, much longer. So, the as-*



*sistant's support for the teacher is considerable and very helpful. Because it's 8 hours, it's such a helpful person. (D22F4)*

While supporting the SEN student, the assistant ensured the **safety of the remaining students** and, if necessary, disciplined them so that the objectives of the lesson were met. According to the principals, the assistant service complements the support needed by children/students with SEN, which is difficult to achieve in a typical preschool/school setting due to the insufficient working hours of a support teacher:

*It's a huge relief for a teacher who's responsible for a group of 25 children. [...] It has changed a lot. It's also helpful for that teacher, in addition to the group. Because it's often necessary to stop the class to attend to each child. (D6F1)*

*[...] When there's no support teacher, it takes a huge load off the teacher. It allows them to concentrate on teaching the lesson. Less time has to be spent working on emotions and difficult behaviour. [...] Then, they're able to manage this coming and leaving. The teachers are sure to emphasise this directly, they appreciate their presence. They even petition the principal for a bonus (laughs) [...]. (D2F1)*

*[...] And a SENA is in contact with the teachers when it comes to teaching lessons. The teachers now know that someone is watching over him, that he doesn't have problems with assignments, or learning. They notice it, that he's now so taken care of. (D21F3)*

*In my opinion, this is fantastic help for the group. Because with this young boy from Ukraine, who doesn't understand Polish who has autism, it was very difficult to conduct classes. [...] this lady comes to our rescue. A huge one. The child has mellowed out a bit, and she's also teaching him a bit of Polish. He may not understand everything, but he no longer reacts nervously to noises that are made to him. It's such an enormous amount of work that would be hard to do for a teacher in an inclusive group where there are five children with special needs. (D5F1)*

Principals taking part in the group interviews expressed satisfaction with the work of the assistants. They analysed the benefits from the perspective of a school administrator. They indicated a better image and **improved performance of the entire school**:

*[...] This gives us this sense of reassurance. Including myself, as well as the classroom teacher and the co-teacher, who can focus on the job. Knowing that SENA is there to accompany the child when difficult emotions appear, when there's an event of some kind that triggers various reactions. This responsibility and the sense of security that goes with it are two such changes. Positive changes. We see that SENA is not just a person assigned to one child. Because our students in this care function really well. (D4F1)*

*The advantage is that this helps both the child and the teacher. Because it goes hand in hand [...]. (D1F1)*

*One advantage is that this assistant doesn't work exclusively with one child but also helps with other issues that are present in the school on a daily basis. (D3F1)*

*[...] But also that sense of security was higher with teachers, because when they finished... finished their lessons – I'm talking subject teachers here – they didn't have to worry about things like who was going to get the child from point A to point B. Because we SENA is here. (D24F4)*

*But this influence is indeed noticeable at our school, not just for this student. Because the group is very big, there's also a girl from Ukraine, so indeed the teacher, who's alone except for English, IT and PE, finds it hard to focus attention on all the children at the same time. And here, the team of 27 in the second grade, it's tough. To devote as much time to each child as they need [...]. (D18F3)*

A positive outcome of supporting a child/student with SEN was that **the assistants communicated and collaborated more frequently with other professionals** in the kindergarden/school. The quality of lessons was improved by regular exchange of observations about students between assistants and teachers:

*[...] And she starts this thought process herself, she comes up with suggestions. It turns out that we can achieve a great deal. (D11F2)*

*[helps – author's note] other professionals. They share. This exchange of ideas has become more frequent and more accurate. More of these aspects can be discussed during this conversation. (D19F3)*

*[...] It has been truly positive for this project to boost the level of communication between adults. I consider it a huge benefit for such a young team. (D24F4)*

*[...] And I'll be honest and say that this project forced us to cooperate in some way. I have a young team. And so these various plans, programmes that have been created, have forced the girls to communicate better, to have ongoing, daily conversations. [...] Well, we talk practically every day about problems, about the progress not only of X, but also of other children. Another programme of ours has now been created internally, concerning the development of the social-emotional sphere. [...] We put it all together, and the benefits are enormous. (D24F4)*

Through their work with children/students with SEN, the assistants not only gained **new skills**, but also **developed personality traits** that ensured that their interactions had a positive impact on the development of the children under their care. They placed particular emphasis on the value of patience, empathy and responsibility. They also found their daily work difficult, as they sometimes had to deal with self-aggressive or aggressive behaviour of their students. However, by working together with teachers and mothers, the assistants gained experiences that were useful in developing solutions aimed at the development of the child/student. Statements by the assistants indicated that they gained new knowledge and improved their social competences at work:

*This job as an assistant has been a positive experience in so many ways for me because at university, there's sort of purely theoretical content. Those 40 hours of student placements are nothing compared to what I now face on a daily basis, so to speak. (A11F3)*

*[...] As for my development, I'm learning patience a lot, so that's kind of where my development is here. And I'm also learning empathy... but it's typical with this spectrum. This is where you have to understand that it's normal. Sometimes it's impossible to change some behaviours. (A9F2)*

In some cases, the experience gained from working as an assistant provided **validation for the choice of a future career path**:

*Sometimes, despite the fact that my student has fits of aggression and calls us names using such, well, nasty words, I don't feel offended at all and I don't see this as a disadvantage of this job. I've also learnt, like you said, patience, a lot, and the positive aspects are practically the same, because I love working with these kids. I love the whole class, all these kids, [...]. (A12F2)*

*[...] we can fulfil ourselves by helping this kind of child, and the child can see increased acceptance. They see this support in us, that we're there to help out. Another advantage is that we can work together with specialists and suggest ways of working with the child, if there are any deficits. So it's also an advantage for the child, because the deficits are corrected and we practise with the child. We simply move in the same direction, setting goals together. (A10F2)*

Moreover, collaboration with various professionals gave the assistants a **sense of belonging to a team** and provided confirmation of the value of their work:

*[...] On the other hand, she's sort of an intermediary between the teachers, exchanging these observations of theirs, and passing them on. It's important that other teachers perceive SENA as a supportive person. One that can support them in other tasks. [...] teachers have gotten used to the fact that SENA is present at teachers' meetings and training sessions, and that they participate in the life of the school [...]. D19F3*

*She [the assistant – author's note] sums it all up for me afterwards, the entire month. We have a teacher and a co-teacher in our groups, we work together really well. This assistant also contributes a lot. (D7F1)*

*Because you can count on her assistance with all sorts of things. School is not just about lessons, every teacher has a lot of work. The other teachers appreciate her help, she's treated as a partner, she's our colleague. She also states that she enjoys being here [...]. (D18F3)*

Positive effects of the assistant's activity are not limited exclusively to the persons in question, but extend to the establishment itself (kindergarden or school) where the child/student with SEN resides or is educated, as well as to the **educational offer directed at children and parents** alike. Any educational institution which offers assistant services opens itself up to children/students with SEN, offering them individualised help and care:

*[SENA's work – author's note] positively affects the atmosphere and work culture of the school. (D18F3)*

It should also be noted that occasionally, the participation of the kindergarden/school in the project and the employment of an assistant (SENA) **enabled a child with SEN to be educated in an establishment** closer to his/her place of residence:

*Also, what I think is significant is that when a child is younger, it's good for them to stay in their immediate environment, especially a disabled child. In our country, these specialised centres are 30 kilometres away. And thanks to the fact that SENA is with us, this disabled child can be with us, in these groups, preschool groups and these early classes. I think, even until the completion of primary school. This child could then finish this primary school with us. They wouldn't have to commute someplace else and struggle, and then the commuting, you know, takes a very long time, they come back late; it's exhausting, frustrating. And here you have the convenience of your child being close to home and being able to receive education [...]. (D19F3)*

An establishment that joined the project and employed a SENA gained adequate conditions for the admission of a child with SEN to the kindergarden/school:

*Mum is overjoyed because previous attempts in another kindergarden were unsuccessful, the girl functions fine and so does the whole group. (D8F2)*

*[...] Also, they want to send their second child to our kindergarden because of the progress they witness. So the benefits are real. [...]. (D24F4)*

The opinions of all those who participated in the group interviews indicate that the assistants employed under the project were greatly dedicated to the tasks entrusted to them. The efficiency of the assistants' services was highlighted, as their scope included not only children/students with special educational needs but also their mothers, peers and their parents, teachers, other assistants and principals of educational institutions.

Assistants' support resulted in a change in the environment in which the SEN child/student functioned. Kindergartens/schools were becoming educational spaces that were more friendly and adapted to the needs of the child/student with SEN. Having recognised the value of the assistant's work, principals declared the need for the continuation of assistant services. While reflecting on the future of the SEN child/student in the institution without assistant support, assistants and mothers expressed concerns about the child's future performance. Children/students with SEN, who were provided with individualised multidisciplinary support tailored to their needs and abilities, were more likely to enjoy better personal, social and cognitive-emotional development, and thus were expected to function better in adult life.

### 3.3.5. Project management challenges

Difficulties were split into two groups participating in the focus studies, as it became apparent during the analysis that those involved had different points of view, depending on what role they played in the project. Principals looked at difficulties mostly from an organisational perspective, while teachers and SENAs saw more of the process of SENA involvement at school or kindergarden.

## Results of the focus groups of principals of establishments

Table 28 shows the difficulties described by the principals, which included two main themes: (1) related to the organisation of the project, (2) related to the SENA.

**Table 29.** Grouped themes in the area of difficulties perceived by school/kindergarden principals

Organisational aspects
Interpersonal relationships Time delays Completion of required documentation Trainings for different groups of participants Communication and information flow Financial issues
Challenges related to the SENA
Recruitment (including cases of resignation) SENA's responsibilities SENA's working time SENA's job stability and remuneration Duration of the project

Source: own study.

The thread on organisational issues accentuated the problems related to the number of people involved in the project. These included principals, teachers, assistants, children and students with special needs covered by the project, their parents, the school authority and the project organisers. The number of people committed to one child/student and his/her assistant was therefore significant. At times, this generated difficulties, which the teachers talked about during the focus interviews. Here are some of the statements:

*This problem with communication, that we don't have direct contact, only through the leading body. We have a very kind person here, she helps us a lot – but as directors, we need certain issues to be resolved right away. We need to make a phone call, make enquiries, so that it's as quick as possible. However, sometimes we had problems with this. (D1F1)*

*[S]ome parent failed to properly fill in some document, and the foundation requires me to have the parent take it back, complete it right away and we have to resend it. Well, it it's the employee, there's no problem, I have these ladies at work, but when it comes to the parent – well, I can ask politely and let's be honest, I'm the one to provide explanations, from the position of the principal, for mistakes that don't result from my actions. (D14F2)*

*Meanwhile, a huge problem for me is to mobilise the priest to participate in this study visit and I don't know if I'll be able to do it, because my repeated requests, reminders, I've even sent it to him recently through the electronic logbook. A note which stated that under the agreement we are obliged to participate in the pilot study. So far, I have failed – neither has he filled in the application form, nor has he participated in the study visit. (D20F3)*

*To begin with, it was a question of gaining the trust of the parents, exactly, not even of the child but of the parents. It was sort of challenging. That's how I remember the first two to three weeks. These are young people, so the parents weren't quite sure if they could handle it. (D23F4)*

A wide variety of issues emerged in this thread, drawing attention to various interpersonal relationships. These ranged from matters pertaining to the flow of information and the mediation of messages, through the sense of duty (or lack thereof) of one person towards another, to extremely delicate matters such as confidence in one another.

The second theme concerned the timing of the project and the delays that occurred. Some of these resulted from situations beyond the control of any of the parties involved in the project because it was the consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet operating in a pandemic and post-pandemic reality effectively made it difficult to carry out multiple stages of the project and introduced organisational chaos:

*Problems arise when it comes to project implementation. Waiting for the project implementation itself. Almost a year, 8–10 months, to get a SENA employed. (D4F1)*



*That was a very serious issue for this project, this two-month break. The project was supposed to start in January, then we got information that it would start in March, then April. Three months of stalling, when the training was supposed to commence, it didn't. (D15F2)*

On top of this, there were other situations causing delays, which once again added to the frustration of the respondents:

*The prolonged course of these formal matters, dragged on for a very, very long time. (D2F1)*

*Information came late on more than one occasion. Let me give you an example: it was only in November that the guidelines for the wording of the employment agreement appeared. So I had already entered into an employment agreement starting from 1st September, and it turned out that it had to be stated there that it was actually a teacher's aide. We didn't have that in the agreement. So things like that, I'm complaining about organisational aspects, because you can't make a phone call, there's only email. It definitely makes some information delayed and that's it. (D2F3)*

The human factor is evident in these cases, and some problems of a more formal nature and related, for example, to the flow of information. Respondents noted that some delays were attributable to the information channels designated by the organiser, which at some points blocked the possibility of taking further action or meant that actions taken had to be corrected at a later date. The subject of communication itself was very broad. It constitutes a specific and broad category and will, therefore, be discussed separately.

Another problem identified by respondents was the production of the documentation necessary for project implementation:

*We have a huge number of these documents to fill in from various sources. (D15F2)*

*And this documentation... Especially this lady assistant has a lot of all these papers. She comes in, she asks questions, I don't know the answers myself. (D3F1)*

*The issues of, for instance, documenting a SENA's working hours is such... that we do it a bit 'instinctively'. Because even having done all these trainings, I try to attend them all, also online. Well, it's handled in various ways. We don't have these clear guidelines. We have to rely a bit on what we think is appropriate. But when it comes to inspection, we're also not sure if we're doing it right. So there's this uncertainty. (D1F1)*

It turns out that the training courses were not always sufficient to understand the highly complex project documentation. Given the fact that the project took on both a practical and a scientific dimension, the documentation included not only the formal issues necessary for the organisers but also many research tools. The directors were informed by the assistants that the latter portion of the documentation (research tools) posed problems for them due to the volume and frequency of its completion.

Certain problems were also reported in relation to training, which was planned as an important and integral part of the project:

*Well, it's these training sessions during the working hours. We just have to substitute that person. (D3F1)*

*The worst thing for us was that there was no timetable for training. Often, information about the training was posted one day before it was supposed to start. Frequently in the evening. This is already very difficult organisation-wise. Because when we know it two weeks in advance, we're able to plan everything. (D4F1)*

*At one point it was such a triumph of form over substance. The number of training sessions that were offered... well, I say offered... if they had been offered, it would have been a different story. They were required to be attended by teachers who were functioning in a particular group. I can understand one, maybe two training sessions [...] A principal, well, you know, can spend the whole day training, but when the training was offered to me on the 31st of August, where every principal knows that it's really the deadline for all the things that were supposed to be done – I was supposed to go to some training from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. [...] And constant*

*stress, because other training sessions kept coming, and now – I was at the training session, but it says there's another training session, and another. (D12F2)*

*So the problem is that if I find out in the morning that there's a training session and SENA's going to be absent, I have to find some kind of substitution on short notice [...]. (D23F4)*

*We had to provide training not only to SENAs, not only to ourselves as management staff, but to all the teachers teaching the child in question. In the case of one of my students, it was seven additional people. Teachers with years of experience, we've been practicing inclusive education for many years. The training consisting of a study visit was perhaps interesting, but for me, it resulted in me having to change the organisation of school work for a few days because there were a lot of substitutions. (D15F2)*

The problems related to training can be summarised in the following bullet points:

- › inclusion of many people (assistants, teachers, principals, school specialists) in the training, which caused organisational difficulties in the establishment;
- › the obligatory character of the training, even though some teachers/specialists have been working with children with various disabilities for many years, are qualified and have a great knowledge of the subject;
- › organising training during working hours;
- › the need to reorganise the working day at school or kindergarden during the training, e.g. finding substitutes for absent staff;
- › no training schedule or dynamic changes to the existing timetable;
- › late information about training from the organisers;
- › stress on whether everyone attended the training they were required to attend (sense of responsibility on the part of the school/kindergarden authorities).

Once again, these problems included threads about the flow of information, particularly from the organiser to the project participants:

*A big problem for me and a hindrance was also the flow of information. [...] I would find out that the ladies, for example, would not come to work today because they had training. But I learnt about this just in the morning, so for me, well, sometimes it was so troublesome. [...] But also to settle those training days, I also didn't quite know how I was going to solve that. I didn't get any outside instructions from your organisers. (D25F4)*

*No direct contact with the project supervisor is the biggest problem. I had some luck with this contact, because there had been a first aid training at our school before. But before that, it'd been difficult to get answers by email. And that really is a problem when we have to deal with something. For example, regarding the documentation, which was constantly being modified. (D17F3)*

*I say it again, there was no phone contact, only email. (D21F3)*

*Struggling to get in touch with the organisers, these emails were ambiguous, sent at the last minute. (D11F2)*

*Our questions simply flooded the man who takes care of the project at the town hall and he also said "Listen, there's a problem with communication, with the institution that is organising it" (D14F2)*

*I didn't know who I was supposed to talk to or what to talk about. Of those managing the project. We didn't know who was dealing with which aspect. (D4F1)*

The adoption of a specific strategy for communicating with project participants by the organisers was a considerable impediment that was pointed out by a number of focus group participants. Communication and obtaining information were often fundamental to taking action and understanding their role in the project. Allowing principals to communicate exclusively by email was criticised because they were and felt responsible for the proper conduct of activities on the premises. Some of the relevant information was communicated through the leading body, which further slowed down the flow of relevant content. Interviewees also experienced difficulty in discerning who among the organisers was able to answer their

specific questions. There were times when answers to emailed questions came “late.”

Another major issue that at times proved problematic was finance:

*A lot of other costs are borne by the leading authority, whether it's the welfare fund or a number of other things, as I've also brought these people in here as my employees. This is the leading body's own contribution. It wasn't precisely communicated at the beginning. (D12F2)*

*So, just as in other projects, for some purchase of materials, if only this paper and the like. Well, there may be wealthy schools that don't find this a problem, but we do. (D18F3)*

*For me, for example, the major cost involved was the matter of the notarial deed. To find people who would just take on this notarial, financial responsibility. So that was kind of the biggest problem. [...] No outsider, no stranger wanted to sign this notarial deed. Well, because it involves financial responsibility... That was the most serious one. Well, the cost, for me it was considerable. We got mobilised too quickly, we were forced to open a bank account. I had to pay for running the account for six months, when no money was coming in [...] and now the instalments that weren't coming in... There was a break, so looking for funds to pay this girl. I just had to pay her with my money. [...] We're a small kindergarden and I don't have it... I'm simply operating on a tight budget when it comes to educational subsidy. (D24F4)*

Certain project requirements proved challenging for some establishments, especially the smaller ones. Examples include the requirement to sign a notarial deed or to set up a separate bank account. For small establishments, incurring these costs was noticeably hard. Some establishments struggled with liquidity, especially when payment of subsequent tranches was delayed, and the obligation for the employed assistant was active. For some establishments, certain additional costs (e.g. for the purchase of office materials necessary for the project) also posed a financial challenge.

The second thematic thread raised by the principals was closely related to the SENA person (Table 1). Here, there were elements related to the

recruitment process, the assignments given to a SENA, the formal aspects related to his/her employment and concerns about the time following the conclusion of the project.

At the recruitment stage, it proved difficult to select people who were suitable for the assistant's role, as it is a function that requires a number of qualifications and soft skills:

*Not everyone qualifies as a SENA, and there can be problems later on at school [...]. I agree that they need to be helped because they are at the beginning of their career and are often very young. However, as an educational institution that also faces various problems, it would be nice if we could get some help. To know, when we employ these people, that this person is suitable for the job, that he or she feels this. (D1F1)*

*Two people were trained, but then one of these ladies resigned, and we had to start this process all over again. Because an extra person for children with special needs is invaluable in the establishment. (D6F1)*

When hiring someone who is undertaking a professional commitment for the first time, it is difficult to recognise actual competence and to know with certainty that the investment in the preparation of the SENA in question is the right thing to do. There were principals who lacked more support and guidance in this regard. Simply completing the recruitment and training process did not always prove to lead to success, as some assistants resigned. This was a major difficulty from the point of view of the principals interviewed, as the time spent on training the assistant and the effort involved did not live to see the gratification of that person's professional commitment to the child/student with special needs. The re-training of others and the time spent on this was seen as a loss, especially from the perspective of the child.

The next element related to SENAs themselves and concerned their responsibilities:

*It's kind of positioning this SENA within the group. Who is this person? Is it a teacher? Or just an aide? They didn't know how to find their place at the beginning. Maybe not so much them, but their co-workers. They*

*couldn't accept where this SENA is. Is s/he more important than me? Is this where s/he is supposed to contact the parent, or am I supposed to contact the parent? It's about this start here. (D22F4)*

*We also have a bit of a question here, what to do when the child who's being supported by SENA is absent? Because we could also figuratively "reassign" the assistant to help another child, but here in the system requirements, i.e. project requirements, it's inconceivable that the assistant could take care of another child than the one assigned to him/her. It cannot be documented that he takes care of another child. (D1F1)*

It is evident from the statements that the assistant was a person who had been given completely different tasks from those who had functioned in the school up to that point, and this initially generated a lot of uncertainty. It was, therefore, an essential step to make all those in contact with SENA aware of the scope of his/her responsibilities. However, certain project requirements – from the principal's point of view – were not necessarily seen as beneficial. Assigning an assistant to only one particular child produced a sense of inability to harness the full potential of the employed assistant. Particularly in the absence of the student/child, the assistant should accompany the principal or teachers when they are aware of other needs in the establishment.

A theme similar to the above was the issue of SENA's working hours:

*The downside is that it's for 7/40 of FTE, and we function differently in kindergarden than in school. What then, when the child stays longer at the kindergarden? That child is left unattended. So we are short of these hours. (D6F1)*

*The comfortable situation for the employer is the number of hours because we are applying full-time but statutory working hours. On the other hand, from the side of being an assistant employed at that capacity, ladies – this is beyond human strength, I think. For us employers, it's great because I have a lady employed for eight hours. But eight hours of being in constant contact with that student and attending to their needs, really, for that kind of money – absolutely not. (D20F3)*

*We should be mindful of the fact that she works eight hours, and, of course, we can ask her to continue after this time when she's with her child. However, we should make time available for her to do it during her working hours. If, for example, the child leaves kindergarden early, there's no problem. On the other hand, when the child has those eight hours, I feel a bit sorry for the time that this SENA spends on the paperwork. (D5F1)*

Different perspectives on the duration of a SENA's daily work become apparent here. From the perspective of the supported child/student and the teacher, who is relieved by the presence of the assistant, the long involvement of the assistant can be perceived as positive. In some cases – especially in kindergardens where the child's presence is longer than the student's time at school – part-time employment is insufficient. However, some viewed this from the perspective of the SENA, and it prompted a reflection on the excessive multi-hour workload. Some also flagged a difficulty in the need for a SENA to fill in voluminous documentation. Completing it at a time when the assistant should be accompanying the child is not advisable, but also expecting the assistant to do it after long hours of work – is not obvious either. This is further compounded by the issue of remuneration and job stability, i.e. another problematic issue identified by respondents. This topic was widely discussed during the focus interviews with principals of educational establishments:

*A teaching assistant is a very important person, and the job is very difficult, often much more difficult than that of a teacher who teaches a class at school. This is why I think the financial reward is too small. [...] That is why I want to say that this position at schools and in general is undervalued, and nowadays, finances are very important, as is having a very good employee who will do the job well. (D13F2)*

*Financial issues, SENA's salaries – it would be good to earn decent money. (D11F2)*

*We employ a disabled person's assistant who has a secondary education or higher, we require a great deal of competence, and we offer them a job and pay exactly the same money we pay a cleaning lady or a kitchen help-*



*er. This is extremely unfair. We can't give that little and expect so much more. This will simply not be enough in the market at some point. (D15F2)*

Respondents juxtapose the requirements for assistants, the tasks they perform with regard to a student with special needs with the salary they receive and the current instability of employment. The temporary form of employment stems from participation in the project and is unavoidable at this stage. This is a shortcoming that can be quickly remedied in the future. A more serious problem is the salary. On the one hand, this worker is less qualified than, for example, teachers and specialists (although some mentioned that, as SENAs, there were also some workers employed who are highly qualified, for example, with an educational or psychological degree), on the other hand, this is a full-time position where very specific, often quite specialised skills are a requirement. According to the principals interviewed, doing this type of work should be accompanied by adequate financial gratification.

The final topic discussed by the principals who took part in the group interviews is the issue of the limited duration of the project and, therefore, the duration of the assistant's employment:

*Sadly, we're already worried about what will happen next. The project is going to conclude, and Janek will stay at our school, naturally. But without help anymore. This is very sad and upsetting. (D15F2)*

*We are anxious about the future here too, but I hope that, despite some financial problems, the leading authority will take a positive view of this and we'll be able to continue to support the students. (D10F2)*

*If my child begins first grade, I would very much like to. I'm fully aware and can confidently introduce this person as my child's assistant for a long period of time, that it will be a long-term work and mutual cooperation, especially, for example, for children on the autism spectrum. (D15F2)*

*For me, the big problem – if I'm being honest – is the duration of the project. That it didn't start in September with the conclusion in June, but it started in April for me. It ends in the middle of the school year. The child*

*is left without an assistant. We didn't have permission from the commune, because we also tried to do it this way so that the commune would finance us until the end of June at least. But we didn't have the funds for that, so it was difficult to explain to the student that he won't... That, for example, Ms Anna, won't come to him anymore, right? She said that she wouldn't accompany him during lessons. (D25F4)*

Many respondents mentioned that SENA plays an important role in the student being assisted. Consequently, the end of the project triggers anxiety about the future of the student at school or the child at kindergarten. There are negative emotions about the fact that the child will be left unassisted, especially in the case of students on the autism spectrum for whom it is difficult to accept change. In some cases, the problem with SENA's resignation is additionally made worse by the fact that the assistant was hired during the school year, and the agreement is coming to an end in the middle of the next school year. It turns out that this major change will befall the student during the course of the school year rather than at the end of the school year. Awareness of the needs of students with special needs is the dominant theme here. An obstacle to further employment – according to those interviewed – is the lack of funds and the dependence of the decision on the leading authority, which disposes of the funds.

Results of the analysis of focus interviews  
involving teachers and assistants

Two other groups participating in the focus interviews, namely teachers and SENAs, shared the same spaces during the project. The hardships they experienced coincide, so they are going to be presented together. However, we first describe the problems experienced only by SENAs, which relate to difficulties reported by principals as well. These specifically include: participation in scientific study and training.

Difficulties in completing the survey tools were indicated only once:

*Only by way of example: it annoys me a bit – I'm talking about my experience [...] that these questions there are repetitive and [...] maybe there*

*is, for example, a frequency scale of one to five, for example: "How often do you spend recess with the student?" and so on, but I'd like [...] a question: "What would you change about your work there? Please describe" and there's space to write it down, but I just find it having too few variables, because it's the same thing over and over again, as I say, it's changing, yes, over a month it's better, it's worse, it's improving and so on, because I feel like I'm doing the same thing all the time and I've been ticking the same answers for a few... weeks, and for me it's kind of missing the point. (A7F1)*

Regarding this interviewee's work, the school situation was so stable and hardly changing that the interviewee saw a problem in completing the same questionnaires over and over again, designed to draw attention specifically to the changes experienced.

Another category of difficulties reported by SENAs related to training, or rather to certain organisational issues:

*However, precisely with regard to this organisation, somewhere these emails were arriving too late, or overnight, and here, for instance, we were at work in the morning, and suddenly it turns out that there's a training. (A22F3)*

*Only with regard to the hours – it also sometimes happened that you started these training courses, for example, at two o'clock, right, and I was still at work, and you had to be somewhere, halfway through, on the phone, ok, and when you get home, you have to log in on your laptop. (A21F3)*

*Yes, I'd like to add that it's always announced that you can change the training to another day, to another time, but even if you write to them, unfortunately, no one writes you back. So it's not like you can actually change it, because you can't. And it was stated from the beginning that there would be, for example, three dates to choose from: afternoon, morning, evening, and that's not the case at all. So this is repeated at every training session but never put into practice. (A12F2)*

The problems encountered by SENAs regarding the training can be summarised as follows:

- › unpredictability of training dates (no schedule);

- › trainings taking place during working hours or on holidays;
- › in some cases, the wrong order of training (e.g. OHS training during working hours, optional training with topics relevant to the assistant – at a later date, even though SENA needs to know strategies for dealing with the child/student much earlier);
- › no training coordinator to whom questions could be addressed;
- › contact via email only, which resulted in delays in receiving information;
- › theoretical option of choosing the day and time of training was difficult in practice due to the slow exchange of information;
- › receiving information about training right before it (e.g. the same morning).

**Table 30.** Grouped themes related to difficulties perceived by teachers and SENAs

Preparing SENAs for work
SENA's tasks SENA's skills and competences
SENA's functioning at school
Integration of a SENA into a particular class Establishing contact with the student/child with special needs and the course of the support process Cooperation with parents Feeling encumbered by responsibilities and under-appreciated Uncertainty about the future

Source: own studies

### Preparing SENAs for work

SENA and teachers raised the topic of the role of the SENA and the tasks s/he should perform at school. It turned out that not all those involved in the project were necessarily fully informed about the assistant's tasks. These included both SENAs and teachers:

*We have only just launched this programme, so we're a bit like children in a fog, because we're involved in various training sessions under this project and we don't really know what the assistant's job is supposed to consist of. Is the assistant supposed to be a shadow of the child, or is it supposed to be a person with higher education, for example, an educator, who knows how to react in certain situations? (N8F4)*

*Surely, there should be clearly defined responsibilities for this person, and teachers who work with this assistant also need to be aware of what to expect, and what this person is here for. (N2F2)*

*What I miss is that I don't know what she can do or, above all, what I can demand of her. I haven't been informed about it. (N4F2)*

According to the statements, the SENAs were counting on the teachers to make them understand their responsibilities, to guide them, and to specify their tasks. However, in their statements, many teachers repeatedly stressed that, in turn, no one had introduced them to the issues, and made them aware of the SENA's role. There were cases where the assistant was given this information by a parent, for example, who associated the assistant's role with that of a tutor. Teachers themselves, therefore, wondered, for instance, what the difference was between a SENA and a co-organising teacher. In some statements, however, a clear distinction was made as to who has the right competences to provide assistance and at what times:

*To be honest, according to what I see, what I observe, I need the work of this kind of assistant precisely for outings. For example, when going to PE or when going out, or at break time, but really in the classroom, I need a co-teacher more. (N4F2)*

It came up in the interviews that a SENA should have an educational background in order to be able to take full responsibility for the child/student when, for example, accompanying them without the presence of a teacher or educator who is responsible for the safety of the students under their care. Due to the unfamiliar role of the SENA for teachers, some of them noted periods of inactivity of the SENA without knowing whether they have

the right to interfere and guide the assistant's involvement: "A lady comes in, she's a support assistant, this lady gets up from the child, walks to the back of the room, sits there practically idle, browses her phone" (N4F2). Additional complications include the assistant's not being aware of the tasks during the child/student's absence from the kindergarden/school:

*In the case of the assistant, the situation must also be clear: what are her working hours? And what if the child is ill? Does she have to go, or can she go home? (N2F2)*

The same is true for SENA. Unsure of the scope of their responsibilities, they are also uncertain as to how much of their support is possible and relevant in different capacities:

*Maybe to assign if there's IPET or WOPFU, to assign in this respect, what can a SENA do or how to improve it so that he has, I mean, I've seen this IPET and that one, but what is he supposed to work on, what can I do? Do I just accompany you? Is there any work I can do to improve these recommendations from this WOPFU team or IPET. (A9F2)*

*I also struggled at the beginning with the fact that I think the teachers didn't really know what it was about in general [...] – this project – what my responsibilities are in general, how much I can go beyond it... because actually... well, as far as I know I'm supposed to be the shadow of a child, I... well, I don't know if I should motivate it at all and I should be... ask it all the time to write, to do anything, yeah, well, I talk to it at breaks and so on. (A2F1)*

Defining the responsibilities of SENAs seems to be of fundamental importance for achieving optimal engagement of both assistants and teachers and for establishing a satisfactory collaboration. Some SENAs feel overwhelmed: "the scope of our responsibilities and what we do are completely two different things – what they prepared us for and told us about, and what we do now and what our remuneration is for our responsibilities" (A6F1). Unspecified responsibilities and the vagueness of the role SENA is expected to play in the school classroom elicited a variety of

reflections from many respondents. It also prompted reflections among teachers regarding the competence of SENA and his/her involvement or lack of specific activity on his/her part:

*If only she would sit with the child on that carpet with the other children and encourage the child to at least play with those blocks, to build a tower or whatever and establish relationships. There's no such initiative on the part of this assistant here. (N3F2)*

*As far as toileting is concerned, well, sometimes she'll go on her own, but she rather needs to be reminded that it's necessary to go to the toilet with Ewa, right, so as not to have something happen that shouldn't happen. Feeding as well... You have to remind that assistant about it." (N3F2)*

On the part of the assistants, the frustration associated with this is also apparent:

*One child is very calm, but some cause us to work at such a high risk, [...] that no one has trained us, for example, in such methods of dealing with situations that are dangerous for us and very stressful, and that here this issue may have been omitted at the training stage to prepare us for it, just like that. (A6F1)*

*In September, I was under the impression that they were expecting miracles from me, that they just weren't able to do it for a year, and I'm going to change everything in one month; so it seems to me that the girls here also have a problem with the management and the teachers, that they think we're here to... well, to change the child completely, so that the child starts to function great, will turn out fantastic after a year, let's say, or after six months of our work. (A2F1)*

As we can see, some assistants, on the other hand, felt that there were inadequate expectations from the school personnel, as they often took over the responsibility of caring for a child who required a lot of attention, commitment and effort on their part. Some student/child – SENA relationships were even perceived as extremely stressful, sometimes even

threatening, which demonstrates the enormous responsibility that these assistants are burdened with.

The second group of topics related to the functioning of SENAs in the institution. First, let us look at a SENA's integration into the life of the school/kindergarden. Not all respondents found this process to be as they had expected. Here are examples:

*Maybe also sort of making those children who are still in the group aware of why I'm here and what I'm doing, and so that they also sort of, at least initially, know that there's nothing wrong, yes. (A13F2)*

*With me... when I wanted to introduce myself to the class at the beginning, well that's... [...] I went to the principal to consult on how to introduce myself, because I wanted to openly say that I was a teaching assistant. I wanted to explain a bit that I'm here for the project, that I'm here for him, but also for them, if they want any help, I'm open to contact, of course. But I was told not to use the words I'm an assistant, not to say [...], not to say anything to the students about what role I'm sort playing here, also I felt a bit dissonant because... well, I was presented a bit like a teacher's aide [...] I had this little dissonance. (A7F1)*

*I wasn't introduced, first I came for OHS training, I was supposed to come on August 20, I came and it turned out it was cancelled because the lady who was going to do it for me just didn't come, and nobody informed me. I came on the next appointed date, I had to wait, then they told me to come, I thought I was going to meet the teacher first, the child, whatever, no, they told me to come to the classroom, I came to the classroom where the lady teacher told me that she didn't need an assistant, so then again to the principal's office; at the principal's office: "But I told you where to go" – and I say, "But I was asked out." [...] Then they assigned me to another class, I went there, I introduced myself to the ladies, the lady told me: "So you're working with this child, please sit here," I couldn't even say hello to the class. (A5F1)*

In the cases above, and in at least a few more, a SENA was not properly introduced to the group, was not presented, and was not allowed to get



to know the class unit. In some cases, the child's teacher was also not introduced beforehand: "She was not introduced to me at the beginning of the school year. She approached me on her own at the beginning of the school year and told me who she was. And no one informed me beforehand." (N1F4), which shows that both parties were in a difficult situation. Moreover, some of the assistants had not met the child in their care or the student's parents beforehand. From the teachers' perspective, the process of a SENA's integration into the group was also sometimes difficult, especially in those grades where there were already adult assistants in place to support the learning process:

*There are also situations where there is a co-teacher and an assistant and they are actually sitting next to one student. [...] And we also have children from Ukraine, there's a fourth adult in the class and it's not very comfortable. (N1F2)*

*If it's a child with mental disabilities and there's some kind of motor disability, then at the classroom level, for me, that person is superfluous, they're unnecessary until the very moment they leave the classroom. The fact that he drops something from his desk or bench, we are able to help him, so to speak, on a daily basis. He doesn't need another person for that. If anything, I need a co-teacher. (N4F2)*

As can be seen, a SENA was at times perceived as someone who should only support the child outside the classroom. This depends on the type of disability and the difficult situations that do or do not arise during the lesson.

Another sub-theme concerned the SENA's establishment of contact with the student/child with special needs and the support process itself. This topic was raised by a number of interviewees, both teachers and SENAs, who identified quite a few difficulties in this area. Since it is crucial, the floor will first be given to the assistants by quoting certain statements:

*So far, I haven't really had any access to any documents, nor any conversation with the parents, with the class in general, nor with the child's parents, in fact I've gained all my knowledge about the child while working*

*together, and so from other sources I've managed – side sources – to ask someone there something, casually, but that would give me some knowledge and help me in my work, if I also go to the principal's office with some questions, it just... (A5F1)*

*It's work with a boy, as I mentioned, socially maladjusted, who displays oppositional and rebellious behaviour. It's been really hard here since September, to be honest, it was probably my first job where I wondered if I should just quit. It was really hard, the boy was hitting me, biting me, pinching me, pouring water on my feet, jumping all over the cupboards. It was literally like a wild animal that had been let out from a cage, that's how he behaved. (A2F1)*

*Also, it was unpleasant when he laughed at me at the beginning, I can't lie about it, it was just so.... Well, unpleasant to hear something like: "Oh, how were you able to graduate?," things like that. (A7F2)*

*Over time, I simply noticed that the boy was not as advanced as I was told he was. (A2F1)*

*For when he stabbed me with scissors, for example, the children got scared. (A2F1)*

*So that was just the kind of forced, shouting at me, yelling at me: "You have to write here! Write this! Right now!" (A2F1)*

In relation to the difficulties described by a SENA in interacting with the child/student, there are problems that should – at least in some cases – be properly addressed:

- › failure to provide the assistant with information about the child, the need to obtain this information through informal channels;
- › providing the assistant with false information about the child's functioning and needs (e.g. stating that the child handles certain situations well and has already mastered certain skills, even though this is not true);
- › not being able to contact the child's teachers, tutor, or specialists who know the child before starting work with him/her;

- › no prior contact with the child's parents and the opportunity to confront their ideas and expectations of a SENA, and the inability to set a common goal;
- › feeling unprepared for situations that are very challenging, extreme, perceived by SENA as dangerous or even a threat to the assistant and/or other students;
- › lack of support for a SENA when a student displays undesirable behaviour towards them, e.g. contemptuous, ridiculing comments towards the assistant, demonstrating an unwillingness to be in the company of a SENA, using physical, verbal, or psychological violence towards a SENA;
- › perceived lack of support in balancing between caring for the child's comfort and setting boundaries.

In turn, teachers note other problems in SENA–student contacts:

*You also have to make sure that you don't do the work for the child but that you support it. And not to stand behind it all the time, so that it also has the opportunity to try to cope with something individually. And not that the children don't do anything because someone will do it for them. (N3F1)*

*At our place, they're the ones who are embarrassed and ashamed. They don't like having these assistants around. Sandra [...] once told me in confidence that, oh, she wouldn't want an assistant here, because she's embarrassed, ashamed. Everyone knows... They, well, these young people are already self-conscious enough. (N3F4)*

*A SENA is capable... because the contact is very good, she has established a rapport with this student. There was even a moment when we pointed out that the student had to work on his own, because he demanded almost everything. Even giving a pen, giving a notebook, and actually the student has mild, but still motor dysfunctions, so he really has this... (N5F3)*

*She was able to cope with it without any problem, and the moment the assistant appeared we started to observe just this kind of withdrawal, that she waited until it was given to her, that Ms Zosia would write it for*

*her. She stopped paying attention to what was happening on the board, she started to rely only on what the assistant was doing... even the speech therapist observed such outbursts of aggression when Ms Zosia was not there [...] it suddenly turned out that after cooperation with a SENA, good grades were appearing and we, as teachers, started to fear whether this was going in the right direction. (N1F3)*

Teachers perceived the following difficulties in the student/child – SENA relationship:

- › a SENA's excessive use of support, protecting the student/child from trying and making mistakes, thereby reinforcing helplessness in some students;
- › difficult emotions felt by some assisted students, particularly in their teenage years, who may feel uncomfortable with SENA's presence and feel inhibited when entering their peer group;
- › a SENA stepping outside the areas of support for which they are prepared, which can lead to them taking on the role of teacher and sometimes miscommunication;
- › the over-dependence of the student on a SENA and the regression of skills already mastered by the child;
- › a SENA doing the student's work for the student;
- › making the student "dependent" (especially emotionally) on the presence of the SENA, which can make it difficult to establish other relationships.

Another sub-theme that emerged was working with parents of children/students who are supported by a SENA:

*His mum is just bringing him up on her own [...], so really, my work at the moment is futile, ok? Since September, what... what have I been doing with him, if he thinks that mum when she says so, it's sacred and just... Instead of just motivating him the right way, that it's cool, that you have an assistant, [...], it's just the opposite, everything goes the opposite way, so... He says straight to my face, yes, what mum said about me and so on, what kind of attitude she has to it all. (A2F1)*

*Also, such deception, because when I asked if the boy had run away from her before, of course, she said he hadn't, that he was walking hand in hand, that he was obeying her. This turned out to be completely untrue, complete nonsense. Because the teachers reported to me that it was not at all like mum says, here with me a couple of times there were situations where the boy did not listen to her at all. (A2F1)*

*This kind of information for parents about... sort of... about different aspects of our work, because we participate in training, and they, I think sometimes they're really surprised that we can... sort of... I don't know, speak about different issues, or participate in various meetings, assemblies or councils. (A22F3)*

*Well, for example, we recently had a trip, so even though I have an assistant, I still have to take the parent. We're not at the stage where an assistant is doing that. N4F2*

The analysis of the teachers' and SENA's statements revealed three key difficulties in this relationship:

1. Lack of parental confidence in SENA (parents do not agree to carry out certain activities with their child, still want – in addition to the assistant – to accompany their child when at school or on outings, do not believe in SENA's competence, do not want to follow their advice or guidance, do not benefit from their insights) – some assistants indicated that this was a problem at the beginning of the collaboration and that it has diminished or disappeared over time;
2. Communicating to the assistant a falsified, idealised image of their child, leading to difficulties in taking appropriate measures by a SENA;
3. Negative attitudes of the parents towards the SENA, openly communicating these feelings to their own child, resulting in problems in the child – SENA relationship.

The parent proves to be an essential part of the relationship. His/her belief in their work can be an instrumental factor in empowering SENAs and supporting the success of the child as well. Some teachers and assistants

suggested including parents in meetings and training to understand that the assistant's actions are meant to foster the child's development.

The penultimate sub-theme was only indicated among SENAs and concerned the issue of employment, signing a favourable agreement and receiving adequate remuneration for work:

*According to what the inflation rate is now, the amount should be higher, so here it depends on inflation. [...] It shouldn't be a contract of mandate, but a rate for a full-time position should be calculated. (A9F2)*

*Well, yes, for example, like my colleague, I think she has 0.66 FTE, I had (?) three quarters, but, so to speak, well, we stay with the child during those hours, but we still have to complete the documentation, we still have to do the paperwork, so to speak... some... aggressive behaviours and contacts with peers, so I also analyse it at the end of the week, during the day we mark how much was done more or less, so this is also work at home [...] I would spent an hour and a half... two hours a day and described it all. (A2F1)*

This is also a topic raised by principals who are familiar with the details of employment and who also assessed working conditions and pay as inadequate for this type of workload. When looking at the activities performed by the assistant, it is important to note that s/he takes on a lot of responsibility and burden of dealing with a child/student with special needs but also completes the extensive documentation required by the project. A SENA's salary, in the opinion of both SENA and the principals, should be higher.

The final topic raised was the uncertainty of the future of the employment of SENAs. This issue was mentioned in the comments of principals, teachers and SENAs:

*I hope there will be no shortage of assistants further on [laughs]. That's the only thing, because I don't have any reservations. Everything is on the positive side. And I'm afraid there won't be an assistant. That's all I can say. (N9F4)*

*It's something nice, and in our case, it kind of came in and will be over in a moment. (N8F4)*

*But here's the problem: the project will be over in a while and SENAs will disappear. (N5F3)*

*The only thing mum's afraid of is what will happen to the child when I'm no longer there, it's just the biggest heartache for her [...] that she'll be left alone... left on her own, because you know, if there are twenty-two children in the kindergarden, it's hard for one teacher to deal with that, plus a child who needs assistance. (A24F3)*

*In the course of this work with the child, we develop a relationship, as the lady said here, the child finally knows who to turn to, and the child trusts her and so on, and I have been wondering for a long time whether we're not doing the child a disservice by wanting to do good in this project, because, let's say, after this contract we disappear and the child is again lost and left to its own devices. (A6F1)*

In all the statements, the child's perspective and the benefits of the presence of a SENA are given priority: assistance in various aspects of functioning in the establishment, the knowledge that there is someone to reach out to for help, a person with whom the child has established a bond, an additional adult who is sympathetic and supports the development of the child/student with special needs.

## Chapter 4. Implications of the study

### 4.1. Competency profile of SENAs

Necessary requirements to be met by a SENA candidate, which are defined in the project documentation and discussed in the first chapter, as well as confirmed by the results of completed scientific studies, include, *inter alia*, the following: a minimum of secondary education or secondary vocational education, a clean criminal record from the National Criminal Register, possession of a current Provincial Sanitary-Epidemiological Station (SANEPID) certificate, good health to perform physical activities that place a considerable strain on the musculoskeletal system, communicative knowledge of Polish.

The opinions of the surveyed principals regarding the subject can be quoted as confirmation of this conclusion. In their opinion, a candidate for an assistant should hold a secondary education or secondary vocational education (97.3%), have a certificate of clean criminal record from the National Court Register (99.2%), a valid SANEPID check-up (99.4%), good health allowing the performance of physical activities heavily encumbering the locomotor system (98.7%), communicative knowledge of the Polish language (99.9%).

In addition, the surveyed principals proposed additional criteria (13 respondents): professional education, e.g. in the field of intellectual disabilities, teacher training, competence regarding monitoring the functioning of the child/student.

A key criterion for all groups of respondents (principals, teachers, parents) was that a SENA should have experience working with children/



young people. In their view, this could take the form of previous internships, participation in activities with children (e.g. scout organisations) or volunteering. It does not necessarily have to be linked to a formal teaching background.

Respondents confirmed the possibility of including family members of children with special educational needs in the SENA role. However, they suggested considering whether family members should support their child or another child with no family ties to the SENA.

The results of the completed study confirm the need for a SENA to have a wide range of competencies:

1. psychosocial (*inter alia*, resilience in the face of stress and challenging situations, the ability to react swiftly to dangerous situations or situations requiring adult intervention, the ability to make decisions based on analysis of the situation, the ability to deal with difficult situations, the ability to observe and listen, managing emotions, perceptiveness and divided attention, responsibility, the ability to interact and cooperate with others, empathy and openness to other people, their needs and diversity, willingness to learn, flexibility and creativity),
2. organisational (*inter alia*, ability to independently plan and organise work adapted to the current needs of the child/student, ability to arrange cooperation with others involved in the learning/therapy/support of the child/student, ability to reorganise work in emergency situations),
3. communicative (including the ability to cooperate with other adults, e.g. parents, guardians, teachers, professionals, as well as with children/young people, other students, peers of the child/student receiving assistance), the ability to work in a team and to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner.

The group of principals who were interviewed indicated first the need for a SENA to have psychosocial and communicative competences, over organisational competences. Among psychosocial competences, they considered the following to be of greatest importance: responsibility, empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others, the ability to control emo-

tions, and the ability to establish contact with another person. In terms of communicative competences: the ability to cooperate with teachers, experts, children/students, cooperation with parents of the child/student being supported. The lowest requirements were in the field of organisational competence (e.g., the ability to organise care activities that the child/student should be provided with).

Furthermore, suggestions were given for other competences that a candidate for the assistant should possess (these relate to the categories of psychosocial, communicative and organisational competences): positive attitude, ability to use the latest information technology, punctuality, high personal culture, availability, openness to suggestions, knowledge of the basics of child development psychology, mental health, creativity, teacher training, diligence, mediation skills, patience, cheerful disposition, self-discipline, assertiveness, predisposition to work with people with disabilities, self-control.

#### 4.2. SENA's standard working conditions

Special educational needs teaching assistants can and should be employed at any educational stage, educational institutions, public and privately run kindergardens/schools, and in accordance with the Labour Code.

The majority of the principals surveyed (58.2%) believe that reporting on the assistant's work should be in place (17.8% were of the opposite opinion, and 23.97% had no opinion on this matter). The assistant's work-related reporting should, in the opinion of this group of respondents, take place once a month (41.44%) or once a semester (35.27%). They also suggested other possibilities for reporting on a SENA's work: ongoing note-taking in a work log and reporting once a month, daily completion of the work log, there is no need for ongoing, tedious reporting, unnecessarily engaging the assistant, it would suffice if the assistant attended meetings with people supporting the child/student, with reporting as agreed in the establishment.

Among the forms of reporting referred to, the forms most appreciated by the principals interviewed were the assistant's work log (27.05%), the semester report (25.68%), the monthly report (19.86%), the annual report (4.11%). 13.36% opted for no SENA reporting at all. On the other hand, for additional suggestions, they mentioned (9.93%): a sheet tailored to the support process of a specific child/student, noting unusual, exceptional situations, observations on the functioning of the child/student, meetings with the principal and the expert team, opinion on the performance of the child/student, worksheet on cooperation with parents, teachers and specialists. SENA documentation should be kept to the bare minimum.

According to the surveyed principals, teachers, and specialist teachers, it is necessary to document both the observations on the child/student's functioning and the actions taken by a SENA influencing the level of psycho-physical and social functioning presented by the child/student, his/her educational and developmental situation (e.g. nursing, medical, caring actions, actions supporting social and communication relations with other people, suppression of difficult behaviour, support in solving personal problems, including psychological ones).

According to the principals interviewed, the assistant's work should be supervised by the head of the educational institution (45.55%). The remaining representatives of this study group indicated other possible supervisory options: principal and teacher (10.96%), principal and educator (9.93%), educator (9.93%), teacher (9.59%), specialist (mainly special educator, 8.22%).

According to the principals surveyed, the assistant's work should be reviewed: daily (17.81%), weekly (25.34%), once a month (33.22%), once every two/three months (5.14%), once a semester (8.22%), once a school year (0.68%). Other suggested frequencies (9.59%) of SENA inspections included the following suggestions: as needed, at the discretion of the principal, on an ongoing basis as required, several times a week, no need for such a supervision.

### 4.3. SENA's tasks and how they are performed in the kindergarden/school

Based on the scientific studies carried out, it can be concluded that each child/student should be assigned a SENA if they need its assistance in the following areas:

- a) moving around (including means of transport),
- b) eating meals,
- c) hygiene activities and using the toilet (upon agreement with parents/legal guardians),
- d) participating in school/preschool activities (this is where it is essential to motivate for effort, to activate, to enhance self-esteem, to help with the use of learning materials and aids and specialised equipment, to help with taking notes, to remove barriers and obstacles in the immediate environment),
- e) communicating with others, including peers, and participating in group activities,
- f) gaining as much independence and self-determination as possible,
- g) solving problems related to everyday functioning in educational and care-oriented situations (excluding assistance with homework and educational tasks),
- h) regulation of behaviour and emotions, particularly in the case of expressions of aggression, including self-aggression, as agreed with professionals, teachers and parents/legal guardians.

In certain situations, a SENA should receive training in additional areas of competence (assisting a child/student with special educational and care needs):

- a) carry out nursing activities,
- b) supervising the child/student's intake of prescribed medication, monitoring the child/student's use of and assisting in the use of medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheter), operating specialist equipment,
- c) communication and communicating using assistive and/or alternative methods of communication,

- d) supporting a child/student with behavioural disorders or displaying difficult/risky behaviour (in this context, it is important to prevent problematic situations, to ensure the safety of all children/students, to intervene in so-called high-risk situations),
- e) supporting the process of adaptation of the child/student to the preschool/school environment by, among other things, providing emotional support and direct assistance in coping with new situations,
- f) assist the child/student on the way to and from school/kindergarden.

Due to the tasks outlined above, a SENA should be involved in supporting the child/student during:

- a) preschool classes and compulsory school classes,
- b) activities in the field of psychology and teaching assistance,
- c) revalidation classes,
- d) additional activities (e.g. developing interests and talents),
- e) extracurricular activities, e.g. field trips, green schools, outdoor classes, etc.,
- f) School/kindergarden celebrations,
- g) breaks between lessons in the school.

The parents who participated in the study had the lowest expectations for the following tasks of the assistant: assisting the child on the way to and from kindergarden/school, supervising the child's intake of medications and the administration of medications taken on a regular basis, supervising the child's use of medical equipment and assisting in the use of medical equipment used on a regular basis, performing/assisting the child with specialized medical procedures related to the disability, assisting in eating, assisting the child/student with hygiene and toilet use.

#### 4.4. Preparation of SENAs for work in kindergardens/schools

Based on scientific research and experience gained by the project executors during its implementation, including the training of the assistants employed under the project and the staff of the institutions (schools, kindergardens),

it was determined that the preparation of SENAs for work requires the preparation of an assistant for a child/student with special needs and the specialisation of the assistants already prepared to work with a child/student with special educational and health needs. The course for an assistant for a student with special educational needs is expected to include a minimum of 68 hours of instruction grouped in the following thematic categories/modules:

1. How does the school function?
  - 1.1. Basic knowledge of how the school is organised;
  - 1.2. The rights of students, parents, school staff, etc...;
  - 1.3. Inclusive education;
  - 1.4. The organisation of psychological and pedagogical support in kindergarden and school as a tool to support the inclusion of students and students with SEN – basic information;
  - 1.5. School as a space for cooperative learning.
2. The child with special educational needs:
  - 2.1. Key milestones in child development;
  - 2.2. The diversity of children and their needs in group/classroom units;
  - 2.3. The assistant's work with the child/student, taking into account their specific learning needs and resources (working on the child's strengths);
  - 2.4. Activities for caring for and supporting the development of the child/student with special educational needs;
  - 2.5. Managing diversity – the role of the assistant in developing social competences and attitudes to foster an inclusive preschool/school community.
3. Legal aspects of a SENA's work at kindergarden and school:
  - 3.1. Legal regulation of activities carried out by SENA in kindergarden/school – care and nurturing activities;
  - 3.2. Legal regulation of the cooperation with parents, principals, teachers and other actors involved in emergency situations (Police, Ambulance, etc.);
  - 3.3. Legal obligation to provide first aid;

- 3.4. Who is allowed to perform essential medical activities for a child with a chronic illness;
- 3.5. The concept of illegality in a SENA's acts and omissions.
4. 4. Tasks and organisation of a SENA's work at kindergarden/school:
  - 4.1. A SENA's tasks carried out at kindergarden and school;
  - 4.2. Principles of organising a SENA's work;
  - 4.3. Areas of cooperation between a SENA and other persons involved in the process of supporting the development of students in inclusive education;
  - 4.4. Effective cooperation with school staff and parents through practice.
5. Difficult situations in a SENA's work:
  - 5.1. Difficult situations in a SENA's work;
  - 5.2. Dealing with challenging situations;
  - 5.3. Professional ethics related to a SENA's work.
6. Supporting the child/student in learning:
  - 6.1. The role of a SENA in developing motivation to work;
  - 6.2. Scope of activities performed by a SENA to support the child/student's learning process:
    - a) activating the child;
    - b) promoting the activity and involvement of children/students;
    - c) supporting activities for children/students.
7. Hygiene and care activities in SENA's work:
  - 7.1. General principles of care and nursing;
  - 7.2. General principles of safely assisting the student to get around;
  - 7.3. Perform basic care and hygiene activities such as feeding, excretion, body hygiene and mobility of the child.
8. Available educational materials and assistive technology at kindergarden and school:
  - 8.1. Plain language and ETR;
  - 8.2. Captioning, sign language interpreter, audio description, induction loop and other solutions for people with visual and/or hearing impairments;
  - 8.3. Digital accessibility and assistive technologies (apps that change speech to text and vice versa and others).

9. Provision of premedical first aid:
  - 9.1. Psychology of first aid, notification of child/student's carers;
  - 9.2. Acute conditions in psychiatry – mental illness, when to call the emergency services and when not to;
  - 9.3. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation + AED in children and adults according to ERC 2015 Guidelines;
  - 9.4. First aid for epilepsy, head injuries, stroke, people with ventriculo-peritoneal shunt in people with hydrocephalus;
  - 9.5. First aid for people with: diabetes (in case of insulin pump failure, administration of insulin, glucagon), dehydration, vomiting, fainting;
  - 9.6. First aid for choking, breathlessness;
  - 9.7. First aid in trauma and bleeding, haemophilia;
  - 9.8. First aid for anaphylaxis;
  - 9.9. Oxygen therapy.

The course will conclude with an exam on theoretical and practical content/components.

However, the specialisation in the preparation of a SENA to work with children with special educational and health needs should include 16h of training (lecture, webinar, practical exercises) in addition to selected issues of support in the education of the student/child, it should also address the issue of support in the area of nursing activities and services of a medical nature. The training should focus on the following groups of issues:

1. Activities related to nutrition;
2. Activities related to excretion;
3. Activities related to body hygiene;
4. Activities related to mobility;

The surveyed assistants highlighted the presence of such content in the training programme as:

1. Alternative and assistive communication methods (AAC) – support for people with expressive language disorders who require alternative language or language support.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Depending on the needs, training may address different communication methods and may include learning the different types of signs used in ACC. Types of signs used in AAC: Spatial-tactile signs, unambiguous symbol system, miniature and three-dimensional adapted



2. Braille techniques in the process of communication with the student, Braille equipment.
3. Operation of specialised medical equipment (e.g. insulin pump) – instruction on how to operate, a SENA’s acceptable responsibility, contact with parents/legal guardians.
4. Improvement of the work practice and self-development – resulting from the needs of a given SENA.
5. Child’s/student’s aggressive and self-aggressive behaviour – who to work with, how to deal with it?
6. Withdrawal and disturbed sense of security – cooperation with professionals and teachers in assisting the child/student.
7. The part of the training programme relating to SENA competences should include the elements necessary to optimise his/her cooperation:
  - a) with the child/student at different developmental stages, whom s/he is expected to accompany in preschool/school situations,
  - b) with the child’s/student’s peer environment,
  - c) with adults from the child’s/student’s environment: parents, teachers and professionals working with the child/student, staff of the kindergarden/school, and at the same time equip the trainee with basic knowledge and skills to strengthen his/her socio-emotional competences, sine qua non for organisational commitment and professional efficiency:
    - › self-awareness (emotional self-awareness, self-esteem, self-confidence),
    - › social awareness (empathy, organisational awareness, helping others),
    - › self-management (emotional self-control, transparency, adaptability, focus on achievement, optimism),
    - › managing relationships (nurturing the development of others, inspirational leadership, influencing, catalyst for change, conflict management).<sup>2</sup>

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signs, hand point alphabet, manual signs, natural gestures, MAKATON manual signs, KOGHAMO, sign language, finger alphabet (dactylography), graphic signs, PIC – known as Pictograms in Poland, PCS, BLISS symbol system, Drawings, Letters, syllables, words.

<sup>2</sup> Based on: Hawrysz L., *Competencies of cluster managers*, “Organizacja i Zarządzanie,” no. 4, 2011, p. 178. The author draws on studies by Daniel Goleman, Nicky Dries and Roland Pepermans.

They additionally suggested addressing the following areas during mandatory training:

1. Selected topics in developmental psychology:
  - a) specificity of the preschool child's development,
  - b) specificity of the child's development at early school age,
  - c) specificity of the child's development at middle school age,
  - d) specificity of the development of a teenager in the early phase of adolescence,
  - e) specificity of the development of a teenager in the later phase of adolescence.
2. Functioning of a child/student with special educational needs at kindergarden and school – understanding special educational needs, recognizing them in the process of functional diagnosis and determining supportive actions in terms of (I) communicating and establishing relationships with others, (II) observing social norms and (III), child/student's participation in the teaching and learning process.
3. Organisation of a SENA's work:
  - a) identifying supportive factors and barriers in the child's/student's preschool/school environment,
  - b) planning work with the child/student in collaboration with their parents and with teachers and specialists in the kindergarden/school,
  - c) identifying the types of child's/student's activities that require SENA support and ways to support the child's/student's independence,
  - d) organising and documenting the course of the working day with the child/student,
  - e) flow of information in the kindergarden/school between a SENA and the principal, teachers, specialists,
  - f) monitoring and periodic evaluation of a SENA's work with the child/student.
4. SENA's communicative skills and principles of preschool/school communication:
  - a) communication channels and principles of communication at kindergarden/school,

- b) basics of effective verbal and non-verbal communication,
- c) SENA communication with the child/student as appropriate to the developmental age, needs and abilities of the student, establishing contact with the child/student and those around him/her,
- d) empathy versus assertiveness in dealing with the child/student and those around him/her,
- e) communication and cooperation skills with adults close to the child,
- f) SENA communication with the principal, teachers and specialists,
- g) ability to cooperate with the child's peers,
- h) ability to develop teamwork integrated around the child's/student's goals derived from his/her functional diagnosis,
- i) selected elements of assistive and alternative communication.

5. SENA's psychosocial competences:

- a) ability to deal with stress and to react promptly in challenging situations,
- b) ability to carefully observe the child/student's functioning in different situations at school/kindergarden,
- c) taking account of the child's/student's subjectivity, choices and decisions,
- d) fostering the child's/student's independence and individuality,
- e) the ability to make decisions based on sound analysis of the situation,
- f) self-management (emotional self-control, transparency, adaptability, focus on achievement, optimism),
- g) SENA's behaviour in difficult situations, including conflicts,
- h) SENA's self-evaluation and own development planning.

As studies have demonstrated, it is also vital to develop a positive attitude during training, the ability to use the latest information technology, punctuality, high personal culture, availability, openness to suggestions, knowledge of the basics of child development psychology, mental health, as well as creativity and patience.

The majority of SENAs considered the following topics as essential training content:

- a) A child/student with special educational needs in a kindergarden/school – challenges faced by SENA;
- b) the tasks and organisation of a SENA's work at school/kindergarden;

- c) supporting children's/students' activity and participation in daily life; supporting the student in the process of acquiring knowledge;
- d) cooperation of a SENA with teachers, preschool/school specialists and parents;
- e) SENA's handling of difficult situations at school/kindergarden;
- f) premedical first aid and self-development of Sa ENA. The content related to the work of the medical caregiver was considered unnecessary.

Furthermore, the respondents identified other useful topics that should be included in the training programme or, if already present, should be covered in a broader and more detailed manner:

- a) knowledge of the needs of the child with SEN, knowledge of disabilities and coping with their consequences,
- b) comprehensive support of the child in various difficult situations,
- c) satisfactory communication with the child with SEN,
- d) specific rules for the functioning of the assistant in the educational establishment,
- e) ways of working with the student with SEN,
- f) legal aspects related to the work of the assistant,
- g) ways in which a SENA can react to unpredictable situations in everyday preschool/school life,
- h) practical aspects of the assistant's functioning,
- i) assistant's cooperation with parents,
- j) communication in the preschool/school environment,
- k) effective ways of dealing with educational difficulties,
- l) methods of working with children displaying aggressive behaviour,
- m) working with a child/student with socio-emotional problems.

Both before and after the training, the majority of SENAs considered the following to be essential in the training: legal aspects and topics related to the assistant's self-development.

Similarly, both before and after the training, SENAs considered content related to the work of a medical care assistant as unimportant or unnecessary – although the number of indications in total did not exceed 14%. 40% of respondents rated the study visit as necessary and 43% as very important.

According to the surveyed assistants, it would be worth adding the following to the training programme:

- a) working with a student in a secondary school;
- b) specific nature of work in alternative schools;
- c) practical guidelines for working with students displaying aggressive behaviour, including self-aggressive behaviour, as well as those on the autism spectrum;
- d) aspects of sexuality of students with disabilities;
- e) boundary-setting when teaching and educating children/students with special educational needs;
- f) ways and forms of cooperation between the assistant and specialists;
- g) knowledge of possible additional dysfunctions of children/students with SEN; the exact terms and conditions of the assistant's work.

The vast majority of respondents preferred the remote form of training – 84.9%, stationary – 15.1%.

#### 4.5. Manner of qualifying children/students for SENA support

In the course of the project, approval for the employment of SENAs was obtained based on a description of a child/student with special educational needs prepared by the grant applicant. Thus, a panel of experts assessed the validity of the description and provided a grant for the employment of a SENA. However, according to the results of the study carried out, this manner of employment of an assistant needs to be drastically changed.

The choice of a child/student to be supported by an assistant should always be individual, depending not only on his/her limitations and resources but also on contextual factors (family environment, peers, school situation). It is not possible to determine unequivocally what kind of special educational needs make a child/student particularly predisposed to receive SENA support – this issue requires further studies in order to create specific categories. The catalogue of individual needs for which a child/student should be supported

by an assistant ought to be open-ended. The results of the study indicate the positive effects of a SENA's work for different types of children's needs.

It is desirable that SENA support is provided to any child, or any student who is experiencing one or more of the following difficulties:

- a) have no or very limited independent functioning,
- b) display difficulties with movement, mobility, independent eating and hygiene, etc., to the extent that they require constant assistance from another person,
- c) have difficulties in understanding content, organisation of learning, etc., to the extent that they require constant support from another person,
- d) have difficulty communicating verbally or to a very limited extent,
- e) have difficulty functioning in a group due to very poor social skills,
- f) display aggressive and/or self-aggressive behaviour,
- g) experience psycho-emotional problems, including depression,
- h) present behaviours that make it difficult for the rest of the group (intrusive, uncontrollable shouting, other difficult behaviours).

Based on the information obtained from the interviewed principals, during the implementation of the project, SENA support was most often provided to children suffering from: autism/Asperger's syndrome, multiple disabilities, and intellectual disabilities. And among the remaining groups of children/students with behavioural/emotional disorders, competence deficits and language impairment. The lowest numbers were presented by children/students who were blind/visually impaired and had difficulties adapting due to cultural differences or changes in the educational environment (including previous education abroad). In the category of other types of special educational needs, single indications concerned a student with FAS, a student undergoing speech therapy and alternative communication with more severe developmental problems, an adopted child with social communication disorders, with self-acceptance problems, with significant risk of social maladjustment, with an early diagnosis of chronic diseases (diabetes, epilepsy).

The difficulties highlighted in terms of independent functioning in kindergarden/school were indicated by:

- a) an opinion on the need for special education,
- b) an opinion from a psychological-educational counselling centre,
- c) medical records (or other documentation),
- d) multidisciplinary assessment of the child's/student's functioning,
- e) assessment made by teachers, specialist teachers, and other experts.

The results of the scientific studies lead to the conclusion that the qualification of children/students for SENA's support should take place through the psychological-educational counselling centres (following an assessment regarding the need for such support) and, in a situation where a child/student is covered by institutional education with the participation of:

- a) teachers and specialists employed in a kindergarden/school who undertake pedagogical observation (teamwork). If it is observed that the child's/student's independence is so impaired that it negatively affects his/her functioning at kindergarden/school, the teacher, specialist teacher, or other professional shall immediately inform the class teacher (school) and the principal (kindergarden),
- b) the principal of the kindergarden/school, who is obliged to inform the parents/legal guardians of the child/student of the need to provide the child/student with SENA support. After obtaining the consent of the parents/legal guardians, the principal initiates the procedure to enable the child/student to receive assistance,
- c) the class teacher or a person designated by the principal of the kindergarden/school, who coordinates an in-depth diagnosis aimed at assessing the child's/student's independence (using a dedicated questionnaire tool). The class teacher or another person designated by the principal should cooperate with teachers, specialists, parents and the child/student in this regard.

When it came to the issue of recruiting children/students to be covered by SENA support, the interviewed principals indicated the following options: request from teachers (63%), suggestions from specialists external to the school (specialist counselling centres, psychological-educational counselling centre) – 14.7%, request from parents (7.9%).

Individual proposals included the following options:

- a) a decision by the principal substantiated by requests from teachers and specialists,
- b) a joint decision of the principal, teacher, specialist and parent,
- c) an opinion of the multi-specialist team headed by the principal,
- d) decision of the leading authority,
- e) open recruitment,
- f) selection of children/students by educators and teachers.

In addition, they listed suggestions of their own to **improve the process of recruiting children/students** to be supported by a SENA:

- a) training for parents regarding the work of the assistant,
- b) increased parents' awareness of the possibilities for supporting their child,
- c) longer time required to observe the child/student before qualifying him/her for support,
- d) careful analysis of the evaluations of children/students proposed for assistance,

The interviewed principals indicated potential problems with recruiting children/students (17% of indications) to be supported by a SENA:

- a) Parents' reluctance to provide information about their child,
- b) too many children/students in need of support,
- c) unclear duration of the assistant's employment,
- d) lack of understanding of the assistants' role by parents, parents' reluctance to cooperate with the assistant,
- e) lack of efficient communication between educational institutions and counselling centres.

It is also advisable to place more emphasis on the participation of the child's/student's (or adult student's) parents/legal guardians in the process of recruiting and hiring SENAs. In addition to professional competence, mutual acceptance and affection are also significant factors for mutual relations and good cooperation. It is the child/student and his/her parents/legal guardians who must trust the assistant, feel safe in his/her company and want to cooperate with him/her. In line with the principles of subjectivity, empowerment and self-determination, they should have the final say in the selection of the assistant. When their cooperation with SENA is not



satisfactory for whatever reason, the help of educational and psychological staff should be requested. 25.3% of the parents surveyed were in favour of parental participation in the SENA recruitment process, 4.7% were against it and 70.0% remained undecided.

Substantive support from principals, e.g., in the form of instructions regulating the process and indicating the selection of the most appropriate candidate, is a significant factor in the process of recruiting and employing a SENA. Such instructions should indicate, among other things, SENA recruitment procedures for a strictly outlined time period, e.g. a school year, the duration of an educational stage (e.g. first educational stage – grades I-III, second educational stage – grades IV-VIII) – this will reduce the difficulty of recruiting an assistant and ensure that candidates can be selected from among those applying for the position. In addition, the recruitment criteria and the procedure for recruiting persons for the SENA position should ensure the elimination of random persons without personal, physical, socio-cultural predispositions, educational experience, or any contact with children with physical, mental, social developmental disorders, e.g. through the participation of a psychologist and a parent (or, in the case of an adult student, the student himself) in the recruitment procedure.

#### 4.6. Principles of a SENA's collaboration with other kindergarden/school personnel outside the classroom

The actions taken by educational institutions towards a child/student requiring SENA support should be adapted to the age and psychophysical capabilities of the child/student. Apart from carrying out tasks resulting from direct support of the child/student, the assistant should work together with the family, teachers and educators and specialists in the kindergarden/school, administrative and service staff of the kindergarden/school, the nurse, other persons related to the educational environment. It is important that people from the child's/student's environment (e.g., parents, teachers, educators, specialists) know the scope of a SENA's tasks.

Hence, it is recommended that the principal of the kindergarden/school, drawing on the information gathered in cooperation with teachers and specialists, as well as parents and the child/student, based on the assessment of SENA support issued by psychological-educational counselling services, should determine the adaptation of the recommended support and the tasks of a SENA, as well as the conditions and method of monitoring the tasks carried out by a SENA.

The principal of the kindergarden/school should inform the child's/student's parents in writing about the extent and manner of his/her support by a SENA and appoint a support team consisting of:

- a) principal of the kindergarden/school or a person authorised by him/her – acting as head of the team,
- b) a psychologist,
- c) an educator (preferably a special educator),
- d) parent(s) or legal guardian of the child/student,
- e) the child's/student's class teacher and other teachers,
- f) other specialists, as required (including, in particular, specialists qualified in special education, speech therapy, educational therapy, spatial orientation instruction, and other specialists).

The principals interviewed listed several options for the possible composition of the team supporting the child/student. These were as follows: The team setting the tasks for the assistant consisted of, among others, the following people:

- a) the principal and teachers teaching the child/student covered by assistance; the principal and specialists working with the child/student (i.e. educationalist, special educator, psychologist),
- b) educational counsellor, psychologist, class teacher, parents,
- c) principal, vice principal, educational counsellor, psychologist, teacher,
- d) class teacher, educational counsellor, principal,
- e) principal in cooperation with specialists and class teacher,
- f) educational counsellor, psychologist, speech therapist, class teacher,
- g) special educator, class teacher, psychologist; teacher, specialists, head teacher,
- h) team of teachers, specialists and parents,

- i) team of specialists; child therapist and class teacher; class teacher, principal.

Tasks stipulated in the scope of responsibilities of a SENA agreed with the principal (but also with members of the multidisciplinary team, the class teacher, parents and, in the case of an adult student, also with the student) should be constantly evaluated and, if necessary, modified in order to optimally adapt them to the current educational and developmental needs of the child/student.

It is important to organise meetings of principals, teachers and specialists working with a given student/child and parents, members of the multidisciplinary team developing individual educational and therapeutic programmes for children/students with decisions on the need for special education, opinions of psychological-educational counselling centres and decisions on SENA support in order to discuss its tasks, organisation and methods of work with the child/student to be provided assistance.

Within the framework of cooperation with other preschool/school staff, the assistant is obliged to familiarise himself/herself with the records of the supported child/student before commencing work with the child/student and has the right to be informed that he/she does not have access to sensitive data, procedures for the flow of information between him/her and other staff in the establishment, the child's/student's parents and for communicating with the principal, teachers, specialist teachers, other professionals, the child's/student's parents and, in the case of an adult student, with the student. These procedures should be further refined by each establishment on a case-by-case basis. Among the particularly relevant principles for the flow of information and communication between a SENA and the management and staff of educational institutions are the following:

- a) clearly defined tasks/competencies of a SENA and other persons involved in the work with the student/child (in unclear, difficult situations, joint work on their redefinition),
- b) designation of a SENA supervisor/mentor from within the organisation (psychologist, teacher, special educator) to act as a consultant when required,

- c) defined time (within the SENA FTE) for own work devoted to, inter alia, consultations with teachers, specialists, other SENAs, participation in additional training to develop SENA qualifications and competences,
- d) access to support from professionals external to the organisation (supervision, training in communication improvement).

As part of the cooperation with the principal, teachers, and specialist teachers, the assistant participates in:

- a) creating and evaluating preschool/school records of the child/student in his/her care,
- b) creating his/her own range of responsibilities for providing support in the kindergarden/school, group/classroom (e.g. during classes, lessons, including special activities, extracurricular activities), outside the kindergarden/school (e.g. during outings, trips, commuting to the kindergarden/school) – if he/she already knows the child/student he/she will be supporting,
- c) creating and adapting support for adolescent students, taking into consideration their sensitivity to the presence of others and their need for undisturbed contact with their peers.

He/she has the right to obtain information from the authorities of the establishment where he/she works regarding the identification of specific staff members of the kindergarden/school, other educational institutions (including medical institutions) where he/she can receive help in case of experiencing difficulties, the person(s) responsible for verifying the relevance, quality, organisation, efficiency of his/her work (e.g. evaluation, supervision of work).

In situations where the parents of a SENA-supported child/student feel resistant to the person, do not accept his/her person and/or work, do not trust his/her knowledge, qualifications, competences, or skills, do not recognise the need to place their child under a SENA's care, he/she should receive informative, consultative help from the facility's authorities or the authority's designated person(s) on how to make it easier for the parents to understand his/her tasks and the nature of his/her employment.

#### 4.7. Principles of a SENA's collaboration with the teacher(s) during classroom activities

When carrying out his/her tasks resulting from supporting his/her assigned child (or children, in circumstances where children's disorders allow the assistant to support more than one child), the SENA should work closely with teachers during group/classroom activities involving the assisted child/children.

The group of teachers surveyed (80%) gave the highest rating to the assistant's tasks relating to: cooperating with teachers, educators and specialists, observing the child's/student's well-being, his/her mental functioning, taking care of the child's/student's well-being, helping him/her to take notes and to function in everyday educational and care situations, supporting the child during activities, encouraging more participation and effort. The group saw the need to prepare a SENA in terms of competences related to the ability to react promptly, to determine the type of activity of the child/student, to cooperate with the parents, to participate in the drafting of an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in kindergarden/school, to accompany the child/student to specialised medical procedures related to his/her disability, to assist the child/student on the way to and from kindergarden/school.

When commenting on the tasks that should be carried out by the assistant, they drew attention to the area of supervising the activities related to medication permanently taken by the child/student, administering long-term medication to the child/student, supervising the child/student's use of medical equipment, assisting with medical equipment used permanently (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation, operation of specialised equipment), operating medical equipment used permanently by the child/student, performing/assisting the child/student with specialised medical procedures related to the child's disability. The next area of evaluation concerned the assistant's activities related to assisting the student in meeting care and educational needs.

In their view, it is imperative to document both the observations on the child's/student's functioning as well as the actions taken by a SENA affecting the child/student's level of psycho-physical and social functioning, his/her educational and developmental stage (e.g. nursing, medical, caring

activities, actions supporting social relations and communication with other people, calming difficult behaviours, support in solving personal problems, including psychological troubles). Documentation should be kept to a minimum.

In order to work effectively with the teacher(s) in the classroom, the assistant should:

- a) participate in meetings aimed at assessing the level of functioning of the child/student,
- b) participate in the preparation of opinions on the functioning of the child/student at kindergarden/school in cooperation with teachers, specialists, educators, parents, etc.,
- c) attend teachers' meetings in accordance with Article 69(3a) of the Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2019, item 1148, as amended),
- d) engage in evaluation activities (continuously monitor the child's/student's activity, well-being, motivation, social contacts, document the child's/student's progress and difficulties),
- e) undertake self-evaluation activities in order to modify the tasks carried out,
- f) engage in activities concerning the improvement of communication with various persons involved in the education and support of the child/student with special needs (not only with the teacher, educator, specialist teachers, parents, child's family but also with the management of the educational establishment, administrative staff, service staff, employees of the regional department of education, psychological-educational counselling centres and other specialist counselling centres, Specialist Centres for Supporting Inclusive Education, special establishments, as well as, where possible and necessary, health care professionals).

#### 4.8. Rules of financing and employment of SENA

Ensuring that a SENA's conditions of employment (including finances) are adequate relative to their responsibilities would increase the number of

applicants for the SENA position and provide job stability. It is proposed that funding for SENA remuneration should come from the educational subsidy. Confirmation of the need to employ a SENA (a decision), based on the request from parents/legal guardians or from the school/kindergarden, should be issued by a competent psychological and pedagogical counselling centre or other specialised counselling centre. It is crucial that the duration of such support reflects the actual educational and developmental needs of the child/student.

As many as 95.3% of the interviewed principals were in favour of creating a systemic solution for employing assistants for children/students with special educational needs. They emphasised the following as arguments for the proposal:

- a) the need to support children/students, especially in very large groups/classes,
- b) the presence of an assistant increases the chances for equal educational opportunities for children/students with different needs,
- c) creating conditions for all establishments to benefit from the assistant's support,
- d) establish the assistant as an important element of cooperation with both teaching and non-teaching staff,
- e) a competent assistant provides personalised support to the child/student, enhancing his/her developmental and educational potential,
- f) the assistant's role should be firmly established in the work of kindergarden/school,
- g) it is a constructive addition to the existing teaching and learning offer of mainstream educational establishments,
- h) the employment of the assistant is a response to a significant shortage of specialists in the kindergarden/school's staff,
- i) there is a growing demand for an assistant due to the increasing number of children/students requiring support,
- j) not only must the employment of an assistant be addressed systemically, but also the issue of the education required of a SENA,
- k) the employment of an assistant would serve as a helpful complement to the influence of the teacher, specialists, and parents.

Among the problems that may be encountered when employing a SENA and that should be borne in mind when devising arrangements for their employment and the financing of the assistant's employment, the interviewed principals pointed out the following:

- a) difficulty in selecting specific candidates for the assistantship;
- b) doubts about the assistant's qualifications;
- c) the assistant's low remuneration;
- d) frequent cases of part-time employment of the assistant;
- e) lack of candidates with appropriate qualifications, lack of teacher training;
- f) a limited number of candidates with a predisposition to work with a child/student with SEN, a large number of candidates unfamiliar with working with a student with SEN;
- g) bureaucracy related to the employment of SEN.

The parents surveyed also voiced their position on the need for a systemic solution to employ a SENA to support children/students with special educational needs in educational establishments. The vast majority (79.8%) were in favour of employing an assistant (20.2% were undecided regarding this issue; there were no opinions to the contrary). They provided the following justification:

- a) the need for an assistant arises from the need to improve the functioning of the child/student at kindergarden/school,
- b) the assistant supports the work of the teacher, who can optimise his/her interactions to a greater extent,
- c) the assistant ensures the safety of the child/student in the establishment,
- d) using his/her specialist knowledge, providing support to the child/student which is appropriate to the situation,
- e) the work of the assistant is necessary because the Polish educational system is not prepared to accept children/students with special educational needs,
- f) the assistant builds a bridge between the child/student who needs help/care and his/her peers and teachers,



- g) the assistant acts as a link of support for the child/student, both in the process of development, and learning and in his/her relations with peers,
- h) creates comfort and a sense of security in parents that their child, whatever his or her educational and developmental needs, is well looked after,
- i) hiring an assistant is the best solution for the well-being of a child with special educational needs,
- j) it responds to the needs of those children/students who do not find appropriate support in the kindergarden/school because of their specific needs and dysfunctions,
- k) the work of the assistant complements the comprehensive support of the child/student in the education system,
- l) it reinforces the work of the teacher, who is unable to provide appropriate support for every child/student with special educational needs on a day-to-day basis,
- m) the employment of the assistant requires clear rules for his/her functioning and funding.

Recommendations for legal changes related to the introduction of the SENA profession, elaborated on the basis of the scientific study carried out, constitute a separate document from the implementation of the project “Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study,” which is going to include draft laws and regulations related to the introduction of the profession and the position of a teaching assistant for students with special educational needs and a teaching assistant for students with special educational and care needs.

## Conclusion

The results of the study carried out under the project “Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study” clearly proved the validity of introducing the position of a teaching assistant for students with special educational needs into the Polish educational system.

The project “Special educational needs teaching assistant – pilot study” was developed in response to the call for proposals announced by the Ministry of National Education. It was implemented under Priority Axis: II. Effective public policies for the labour market, economy and education, Measure: 2.10 High quality of the education system; Call number: POWR.02.10.00-IP.02-00-001/20 by the Partnership consisting of: Educational Foundation ODITK from Gdańsk (Leader), Cooperation Fund Foundation, Association “Sztuka Włączania” [*Art of Inclusion*] from Łajski, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. It was implemented in the years 2020–2023.

It focused on the identification of a significant social problem of today’s world, namely the difficulties in providing adequate and required support for children/students with special educational needs in mainstream institutions (kindergardens/schools). The overarching objective of the project was to improve the accessibility of educational services for children/students with special educational needs, including with disabilities, through the development of a standard for the provision of assistant services.

The results of the study presented in this report, including both quantitative and qualitative research, made it possible to establish the following:

1. the desired competence profile of the assistant for students with special educational needs, with particular emphasis on expected competences and competences that are an important, but not

- predominant component of the profile of this professional (of this profession),
2. the competences of the assistant which are essential for the implementation of the tasks in terms of support and fulfilment of the needs (educational, health) of children/students with special educational needs,
  3. the most accurate, effective strategies and methods of recruiting assistants to work (also with a particular child/student), expected by the surveyed principals of educational establishments, teachers, specialist teachers working in educational establishments, parents of children with special educational needs, children who benefited from the assistant's support in the course of the project and the assistants themselves,
  4. solutions for preparing a SENA to work with a child/student with special educational needs (and with a child/student with concurrent special educational and health needs) in terms of the desired educational content, content that may be considered necessary but is less significant in preparing the assistant for work, content that should be further supplemented in the training of assistants as compared to the scope of training proposed under the project, which corresponds most closely to the needs of the assistants and is the most effective and relevant in their preparation for work and cooperation with people within and outside the educational establishment,
  5. the solutions, methods and forms that are desirable and expected in preparing the assistant for his/her tasks,
  6. possible solutions for qualifying the child/student for the assistant's support in terms of the procedure and qualification criteria, the composition of the selection board, the competences and qualifications required of the SENA in terms of the needs of the child/student to be assisted,
  7. guidelines regarding the work standard for SENAs (cooperation with the head of the educational establishment, the class teacher of the child/student with special educational needs, other teachers,

- specialist teachers, parents, required documentation, assessment and evaluation of the work of SENAs),
8. the effectiveness and usefulness of the tasks undertaken by a SENA towards the supported child/student (progress in the child/student's development resulting from the influence of a SENA's work in the area of psychophysical, social development, with particular focus on independence and self-determination, communication, relations with peers, educational achievements),
  9. expectations regarding the assistant's cooperation with teachers during school hours and other kindergarden/school personnel outside classes/lessons,
  10. suggestions for possibilities and principles of financing and employing SENAs in educational establishments (selected recommendations for changes in legislation enabling the employment and financing of SENAs).

The study also included the evaluation (self-evaluation) of own work by the assistants employed in the project, evaluation of the assistant's work by the principal of the institution, the teacher-educator of the child/student with SEN, parents, and students who, due to the level of functioning displayed, were able to provide scientifically credible feedback and a reliable assessment of the assistant's work.

In conclusion: the introduction of the position (also the profession) of a special educational needs teaching assistant to the Polish mainstream education system is not conditioned solely by the current needs related to adapting this system to the contemporary requirements or even to supporting children/students with special educational needs in the context of high quality education for all students. It is first and foremost an expression of the utmost care for each child, each student, each human being in view of his or her adulthood, of living a life in accordance with the choices he or she has made independently, allowing for self-fulfilment, personal, professional and social self-fulfilment.

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# Annexes

## Annex 1. Evaluation of (self-assessment) SENA

Evaluate your own activities as an assistant to SEN child/student

Place an X in the appropriate box, where:

1 – indicates not at all

2 – indicates poor

3 – indicates average

4 – indicates good

5 – indicates very good

Area	1	2	3	4	5
I was able to identify supportive factors and barriers in the pre-school/school environment that impede the functioning of the child/student					
I was able to plan work with the child/student in cooperation with the parents					
I was able to plan work with the child/student in cooperation with teachers in kindergarden/school					
I was able to plan work with the child/student in cooperation with professionals in kindergarden/school					
I was able to identify the type of child's/student's activity requiring support and apply different ways of supporting the child's/student's independence					
I was able to organise the work for the day with the child/student					
I was able to document the course of a day with the child/student					



Area	1	2	3	4	5
I was able to monitor and periodically evaluate my work with the child/student					
I was able to use different ways of communication					
I knew the basics of effective communication with a child/student appropriate to the developmental age, needs and abilities of the child/student					
I was familiar with selected elements of supportive and alternative communication					
I was able to communicate with adults in the child's/student's environment					
I was able to communicate with the principal, teachers and specialists					
I was able to cooperate with the child's/student's peer group					
I worked as part of a team focused on the goals of the child/student resulting from his/her functional diagnosis					
I was able to carefully observe the child/student in different situations in the kindergarden/school					
I was able to support the independence and individuality of the child/student					
I was empathetic but also assertive in dealing with the child/student and the people around them					
I was able to cope with stress and react quickly in difficult situations					
I was prepared to assist the child/student with mobility and transport					
I was prepared to assist the child/student with eating					
I was prepared to help the child/student with hygiene and toileting					
I was prepared to supervise the child's/student's medication and the administration of permanent medication with the use of specialised equipment					
I was prepared to help the child/student with homework and participate in care activities					
I was able to support the child/student in becoming as independent as possible in the kindergarden/school					
I respected the child's/student's subjectivity, choices and decisions					

## Annex 2. Evaluation questionnaire for teachers on the work of SENA

Place an X in the appropriate box, where:

- 1 – Definitely bad
- 2 – Rather bad
- 3 – I have no opinion
- 4 – Rather good
- 5 – Definitely good

How would you rate the assistant's help in meeting your child's/student's health needs?

Area	1	2	3	4	5	Not appl.
Activities related to supervising the child's/student's permanent medication intake						
Administering permanent medication to the child/student						
Supervising the child's/student's use of medical equipment						
Assisting with the use of permanently used medical equipment (e.g. use of insulin pump, catheterisation, operation of specialised equipment)						
Operating permanently used medical equipment by the child/student						
Performing/assisting the child/student with specialised medical procedures related to the child's disability						

How would you rate the assistant's work in the following areas?

Tasks carried out by the assistant	1	2	3	4	5	Not appl.
Assisting the child/student with mobility and transport						
Assisting the child/student with eating meals						
Hygiene and toileting activities						
Supporting the child/student during activities to increase his/her activity and participation, e.g. by encouraging effort						
Assisting with the use of teaching materials and aids and specialist equipment						
Assisting with taking notes						
Assisting with the day-to-day functioning of the child/student in educational and care situations						
Taking action to remove barriers and restrictions in the child's/student's immediate environment						
Assisting the child/student with communication and participation in the classroom/group						
Assisting the child/student with homework and participation in activities during care activities						
Supporting the child/student in becoming as independent as possible in kindergarden/school						
Cooperation with the child's/student's family						
Cooperation with teachers and professionals in the kindergarden/school						
Cooperation with administrative and service personnel of the kindergarden/school, the nurse, and other persons working or functioning in the kindergarden/school						
Preparation of the necessary equipment and teaching aids for the child/student						
Participation in drafting an opinion on the child's/student's functioning in the kindergarden/school						
Responding to displays of self-aggression and/or aggression						

Tasks carried out by the assistant	1	2	3	4	5	Not appl.
Ensuring the well-being of the child/student in the kindergarden/school and outside the institution						
Performing/assisting the child/student with specialist medical procedures related to their disability						
Communication (e.g. supportive and alternative communication methods)						
Supporting a child/student with behavioural disorders or who displays difficult/risky behaviour (preventing difficult situations, keeping children/students safe, intervening in so-called high-risk situations)						
Supporting the child's/student's adaptation to the kindergarden/school environment by, among other things, providing emotional support and direct assistance in coping with new situations						
Assisting the child/student on the way to and from school						
Supporting the child/student in developing social contacts, enjoying cultural services, leisure activities						
Observing the child's/student's well-being during care, including the child's/student's mental functioning						

### How do you assess the psychosocial competences of the assistant?

Competences	1	2	3	4	5
Resilience to stress and difficult situations					
Ability to react quickly					
Ability to make decisions on the basis of sound analysis of the situation					
Ability to cope with difficulties					
Perceptiveness					
Ability to divide attention					
Ability to manage emotions					

Competences	1	2	3	4	5
Responsibility; ability to relate to others					
Ability to observe and listen					
Empathy and sensitivity to the needs of others					
Openness to learning					
Ability to plan and organise the child's/student's day					
Ability to determine the type of activity for the child/student					
Ability to organize the care activities to be carried out with the child/student					
Ability to organise activities related to meeting the health and medical needs of the child/student					
Ability to cooperate with the parents of the child/student being supported					
Ability to cooperate with parents of children/students in the group/class the supported child/student attends					
Ability to cooperate with teachers, specialists (e.g. psychologist, educator), students					
Ability to work in a team					
Ability to adapt communication to the capabilities and needs of the interaction partner					

Did the special educational needs teaching assistant demonstrate the following organisational competences?

Organisational competences	1	2	3	4	5
Ability to plan and organise the course of the child's/student's day					
Ability to determine the type of activity for the child/student					
Ability to organise the care activities that should be carried out for the child/student					
Ability to organise activities related to meeting the child's/student's health and medical needs					

### Annex 3. Evaluation questionnaire for teachers concerning the progress of a child/student with special educational needs supported by SENA

Place an X in the appropriate box, where:

- 1 – Definitely bad
- 2 – Rather bad
- 3 – I have no opinion
- 4 – Rather good
- 5 – Definitely good

In what areas do you think the functioning of the child/student receiving the assistant's care has changed?

Areas	1	2	3	4	5
Intellectual development of the child/student					
Physical development of the child/student					
Child's/student's school knowledge/skills					
Social and emotional development of the child/student					

In what areas do you feel the presence of the assistant has changed relationships within the class/group?

Areas	1	2	3	4	5
Observes school rules and norms					
Respects adults					
Attends school regularly					
Initiates various tasks for the school and the class					

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Areas	1	2	3	4	5
Is proactive					
Pursues his/her passions and interests					
Maintains peer contacts					
Establishes contacts with peers					
Respects peers					
Helps others, is considerate					
Is accepted by peers					
Is able to cooperate with others					
Is a positive role model for others					
Has colleagues and friends					
Does not give in to peer pressure and has personal views					

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