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Working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds: experiences of Polish teachers from various types of schools

**Praca z uczniami z różnych środowisk kulturowych: doświadczenia
polskich nauczycieli z różnych typów szkół**

Abstract: After World War II, Poland became one of the most ethnically homogenous country in Europe. Despite the growing number of students with refugee and migration background, in the second decade of the 21st century Polish schools were still culturally, religiously and nationally homogenous. This situation persisted until the migration crisis related to the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022. This long-term absence of foreigners and subjects related to working with culturally diverse students at school reveals gaps in teachers' professional training to work in a heterogeneous classroom. The study aimed to explore the educational context, personal and social competences, experiences, challenges, willingness, and preparedness of teachers to work with SEN students from diverse cultural backgrounds in Poland before 2022. We analysed 225 teachers working in integrative, mainstream and special schools using the Two-dimensional Emotional Intelligence Inventory (DINEMO) and the Social Competence Questionnaire. The findings highlighted that the vast majority of teachers are not prepared, have little experience and face challenges working with these students. Simultaneously, we attempted to look critically at curricula,

didactic related solutions applied towards teachers and students in increasingly diversified schools.

Keywords: students with special educational needs from diverse cultural backgrounds, teachers' experiences, emotional intelligence; social competences, Polish school, special education after the transformation.

Introduction

Ideally teachers should have acquired cultural competences in the course of their education that enable them to effectively raise and teach children from different cultures. In addition to factual knowledge, teachers who show good social and emotional skills are better able to enhance interaction with students to create a better caring as well as learning environment. (Stronge, 2007). According to Sutton and Wheatley (2003), higher rates in various dimensions of emotional intelligence (EI) relate to being a more effective teacher. Nias (1996) also mentions the importance of emotional intelligence in education.

Emotional intelligence, being the effective integration of emotion and thought, is a relatively recent psychological concept (Mayer, Salovey and Caruso 2000). The relationship between emotion and cognition was indicated by Gardner (1983), but it was Salovey and Mayer (1990, 189) who proposed the concept of EI in psychology and defined it as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions". Much research has been carried out into the role of EI in the teaching profession, especially with regard to developing relationships with students (Sayko, 2013), as well as maintaining classroom discipline (Valente et al., 2020). EI plays an important role in the educational success of students, skilfully shaping students' behaviour and helping to prepare them to function independently in everyday life (Guntersdorfer and Golubeva 2018).

Teachers with higher levels of EI and social intelligence are more effective when social training a pupil in which the social competences of an individual are shaped. Social skills are 'complex skills conditioning the effectiveness of coping with specific types of social situations, acquired by the individual during social training' Matczak (2007, p. 7), three types of such situations are described:

- intimate situations, these relate to developing and maintaining close interpersonal contacts, along with self-disclosure (e.g. confiding or listening to confessions),
- social exposure, these are situations where the individual is the focus of attention and subject to the assessment of others,
- requiring assertiveness, these are situations where you achieve your goals or needs by exerting or resisting influence.

Currently research is lacking, regarding a pupil's (including SEN pupils) level of EI and social competences and the teacher's level of preparation. This article addresses the opinions of teachers from various types of schools about their preparedness and challenges in working with students with special educational needs and from diverse cultural backgrounds¹. Foreign students under the obligation of schooling or education who do not know the Polish language or whose knowledge of Polish is insufficient and the teachers who teach them, may (as stipulated by the provisions of the educational law and the regulation on the education of persons who are not Polish citizens) be assisted by person speaking their native language – intercultural assistant. This person also acts as a 'bridge' between students representing a cultural minority, the teachers and parents from the dominant community.

Poland is a country where the model of "multiple educational paths" is followed (Woźniak, 2008). Available solutions include access to mainstream, integrative or special education. With regard to its scope of specialist activities aiming to revalidate and resocialise, the integration model is perceived as one form of special education. Its goal is to fully include children and adolescents with difficulties into groups of non-disabled peers (Gajdzica, 2020). Inclusive education aims to remove all obstacles and barriers emerging on the way to a situation when all children learn together (Lindsay, 2007). It entails a complete transformation of schools so that they approach every child in the most individualised and flexible way. The model adopted in mainstream schools attended by groups of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (foreigners) at the time the research was carried out, has to be referred to as an inclusive model with a separation element. The study was conducted at a time when the Polish system of education was undergoing reforms whose pace and scope brought on a number of challenges. Our

¹ The study was conducted before the outbreak of war in Ukraine and before the mass migration to Poland and other EU countries due to the armed conflict. Hence, the context and legislation relating to the situation of children with refugee and migration background do not include changes occurring after 24 February 2022.

study aimed to capture the attitudes of teachers as well as their preparedness to work at this time of particular strain on their professional life caused by organisational problems.

Methodology and methods

The Purpose of the Research

The aim of this research was to explore teachers' personal and social competences as well as skills in working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. We tried to determine in detail whether the teacher's professional type (general, support, special) differentiate the respondents' declarations of willingness to work, preparedness, experience and difficulties in working with these students. In addition, after separating the opinions of individual groups of teachers in terms of these four aspects of working with students, we wanted to determine whether they differ in terms of the level of emotional intelligence and social competences from educators who expressed a different assessment of working with these students.

Participants

The participants consisted of 225 teachers (Figure 1), including 64 (28%) from mainstream schools, 97 (44%) from integrative schools and 64 (28%) from special schools (for students with ID and autism spectrum disorders), $\chi^2 (2) = 9.680$; $p < 0.01$. There were three types of teachers, including: 130 (58%) general teachers, 62 (27%) support teachers and 33 (15%) special teachers, $\chi^2 (2) = 66.107$; $p < 0.001$. The groups did not differ significantly in terms of sex, age or education. However, there was a significant difference (χ^2

Table 1. Descriptive characteristic of teachers according to the type of teacher and type of work (N = 225)

	School				Teacher			
	Special	Integrative	Mainstream		General	Support	Special	
Gender ^a								
Female	56 (87.5)	82 (85.4)	56 (87.5)	$\chi^2(2) = .205, p = 0.902$	109 (83.8)	56 (91.8)	29 (87.9)	$\chi^2(2) = 2.320, p = 0.313$
Male	8 (12.5)	14 (14.6)	8 (12.5)		21 (16.2)	5 (8.2)	4 (12.1)	
Age ^a								
up to 30	8 (12.5)	14 (16.4)	15 (23.4)	$\chi^2(6) = 9.907, p = 0.129$	17 (13.1)	13 (21.3)	7 (21.2)	$\chi^2(6) = 5.430, p = 0.490$
from 30 to 40	22 (34.4)	33 (34.5)	24 (37.5)		44 (33.8)	23 (37.7)	12 (36.4)	
from 40 to 50	23 (35.9)	26 (27.1)	9 (14.1)		34 (26.2)	15 (24.6)	9 (27.3)	
over 50	11 (17.2)	23 (24.0)	16 (25.0)		35 (26.9)	10 (16.4)	5 (15.1)	
Education ^a								
Bachelors	-	1 (1.0)	-	$\chi^2(4) = 2.650, p = 0.618$	-	1 (1.6)	-	$\chi^2(4) = 4.328, p = 0.375$
Masters	63 (98.4)	93 (96.9)	64 (100)		128 (98.5)	60 (98.4)	32 (97.0)	
Doctorate	1 (1.6)	2 (2.1)	-		2 (1.5)	-	1 (3.0)	
Length of service ^a								
less than 5 years	4 (6.2)	20 (20.8)	13 (20.3)	$\chi^2(6) = 9.587, p = 0.143$	18 (13.8)	16 (26.2)	3 (9.1)	$\chi^2(6) = 14.618, p < 0.05$
more than 5 years	12 (18.8)	22 (22.9)	16 (25.0)		24 (18.4)	18 (29.5)	8 (24.2)	
more than 10 years	16 (25.0)	16 (16.7)	10 (15.6)		22 (16.8)	11 (18.1)	9 (27.3)	
more than 15 years	32 (50.0)	38 (39.6)	24 (35.7)		65 (50.0)	16 (26.2)	13 (39.4)	

^aActual figures given (% in parenthesis)

(6) = 14.618; $p < 0.05$) regarding their length of professional service. Among general teachers the most common length of professional service was over 15 years (50% of this group), while among support teachers - between 5 and 10 years (reported by 30% of this group of teachers). 26% of teachers from the latter group had less than 5 years of work experience in school.

The Procedure, Tools and Method

The study was conducted in 6 schools: 2 integrative schools, 2 special schools and 2 mainstream schools in one of the Polish administrative regions – Mazowieckie Voivodeship. The data was collected using a questionnaire

(paper version), the purpose of which was to obtain information on four aspects of the work of the surveyed teachers from three types of schools, with students from refugee families and from families from national and ethnic minorities. Teachers' opinions were collected regarding their experience, willingness to work, difficulties, and preparedness to work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The following tools were also used in the research: The Two-dimension Emotional Intelligence Inventory (DINEMO; Matczak and Jaworowska 2006) and Social Competences Questionnaire (KKS; Matczak 2007). The Two-Dimensional Emotional Intelligence Inventory was used to measure emotional intelligence, understood (based on Salovey and Mayer 1990, p 189) as the total ability to process emotional information. The inventory consisted of 33 items describing emotional situations.

The Social Competence Questionnaire was used to measure the teachers' social competences understood as "complex skills conditioning the effectiveness of coping with certain types of social situations, acquired by an individual in the course of social training" (Matczak 2007, p. 7). The questionnaire consisted of 90 descriptions of various behaviours or actions which the respondents graded using a four-point scale (1 - definitely good to 4 - definitely bad), reflecting whether they believed they would be able to cope with them. The questionnaire allowed us to assess the general level of teachers' social competences (the overall score; SC) as well as the degree of coping with three types of situations: intimate (Int), social exposure (SE) and those requiring assertiveness (A).

Ethics

The research was conducted in the buildings of schools, therefore it required the consent of the principals and teachers working in the institutions, which was granted in each of the places. The purpose of the study was explained, and the teachers were invited to participate in the study. Study participants' identities were coded for report preparation and the subsequent academic publication. The questionnaires were assigned codes. At each stage, participants could opt out of filling in the questionnaires. Each participant could take the questionnaires with them and then transfer the completed material to the collective pool.

Results

First, we conducted an analysis of teachers' work experience, willingness to work, assessment of the level of their own preparedness and the declared degree of difficulty in working with students from diverse cultural

backgrounds: The analysis was further subdivided into type of teacher. The analysis was performed using the non-parametric chi-square test.

Experience of teachers working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds

On the basis of the analysis, we did not observe statistically significant differences between the groups compared in terms of teachers' experience in working with children from refugee families ($\chi^2(8) = 4.202$; $p = .838$) as well as from national and ethnic minorities ($\chi^2(8) = 4.960$; $p = .762$). Regardless of the type of teachers (Figure 1 and 2), the vast majority have no experience in working with these groups of students. In the case of children from refugee families, this applies to over three quarters of the respondents, and from families of national and ethnic minorities - over two-thirds. However, if teachers happen to work with any of the groups, their experience in this area usually does not exceed 5 years.

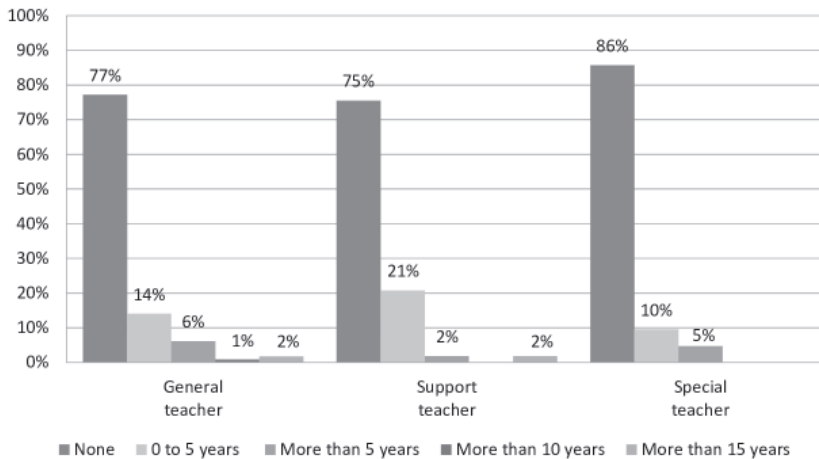


Figure 1. Experience in working with children from refugee families compared in the compared groups of teachers.

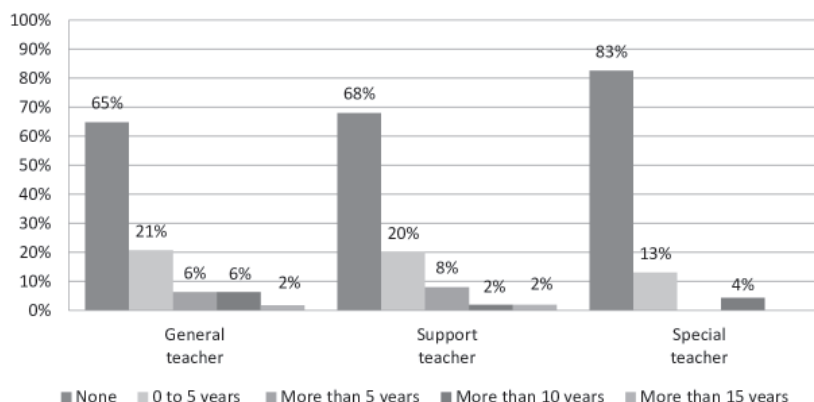


Figure 2. Experience in working with children from families from national and ethnic minorities compared in the compared groups of teachers.

Willingness of teachers to work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds

Analysing the willingness to work, we observed statistically significant differences only for work with children from national and ethnic minority families (Figure 4). We noticed ($\chi^2(8) = 16.484$; $p < .05$) that the teachers' opinions about their willingness to work with these children are almost identical to their opinions about working with children from refugee families discussed earlier. However, in the case of the division of the respondents according to the type of teacher (Figure 5), we observed that the highest percentage (46%) was among special teachers, who did not have a clearly defined opinion about their willingness to work with children from national and ethnic minority families. Moreover, none of the special teachers declared willingness to work with students from families from national and ethnic minorities. Among support teachers, the most frequent answer was that they were unwilling to undertake such work. However, a quarter (25%) of support teachers and general teachers declared strong willingness to work with this group of children. Moreover, among the latter, an additional fifth (20%) admitted that they were rather willing to work with children from families from national and ethnic minorities.

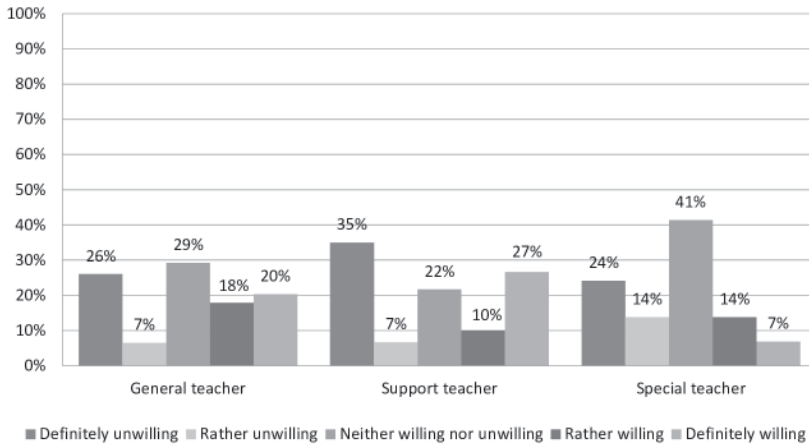


Figure 3. Willingness to work with children from refugee families in the

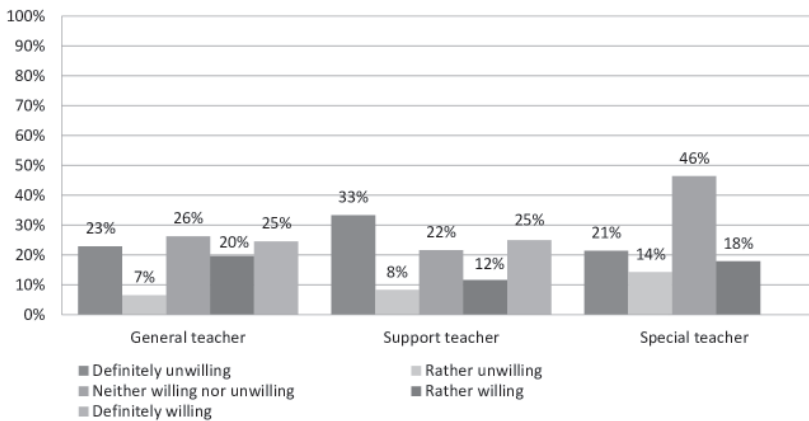


Figure 4. Willingness to work with children from national and ethnic minority families in the compared groups of teachers.

Preparedness of Teachers Working with Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

Based on the analysis of teachers' declarations regarding the assessment of their preparedness to work with children from refugee families, we did not observe (Figure 6) statistically significant differences between different types of teachers ($\chi^2(8) = 10.888$; $p = .208$). In the research group, and in particular among special teachers, the dominant belief is that they are

the least prepared to work with children from refugee families. Only every tenth teacher feels best prepared to such work, while none of the special teachers indicated this answer.

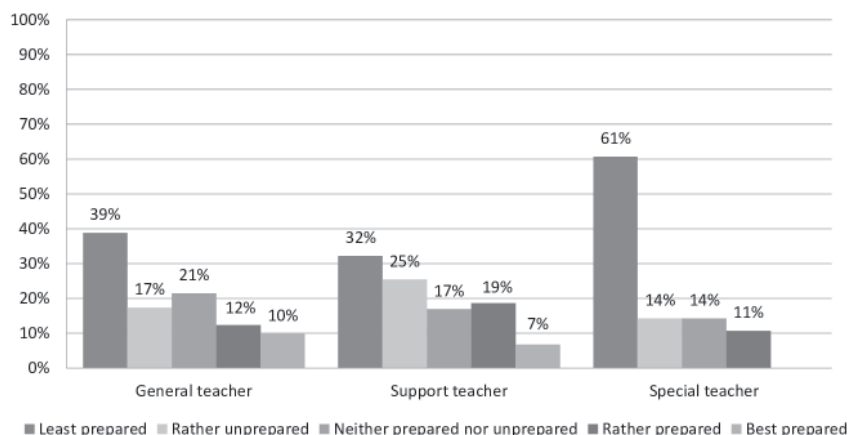


Figure 5. Preparedness for working with children from refugee families in the compared groups of teachers

Teachers' assessments of their preparedness to work with children from national and ethnic minority families differ significantly among respondents depending on the type of teacher ($\chi^2 (8) = 16.910$; $p < .05$). We noticed (Figure 7) that the respondents most frequently reported being the least prepared to work with these groups of students. The highest percentage of such declarations (76%) was among special teachers. Moreover, none of them considered themselves best prepared to such work. On the other hand, among general and support teachers there was (taking into account the answers rather prepared and best prepared) the highest percentage (25%) of those who considered themselves prepared to work with children from families from national and ethnic minorities.

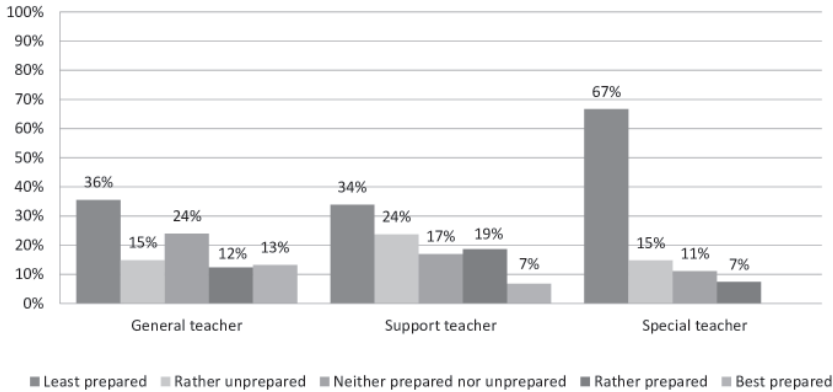


Figure 6. Preparedness for working with children from national and ethnic minority families in the compared groups of teachers.

Difficulties of Teachers in Working with Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds

The analysis did not reveal statistically significant differences between the compared groups in terms of difficulties perceived by teachers in working with children from refugee families ($\chi^2(8) = 10.831$; $p = .211$) and from national and ethnic minorities ($\chi^2(8) = 9.949$; $p = .269$). Regardless of the type of teacher (Figure 8 and 9), the majority of respondents indicate that they experience difficulties in working with these groups of children. Approximately 30% of teachers from mainstream and integrative schools, and 40% of teachers from special schools indicated that they experienced the greatest difficulties in working both with children from refugee families and from national and ethnic minorities. Approximately 20% of mainstream school teachers indicated that they encounter the least difficulties with such work.

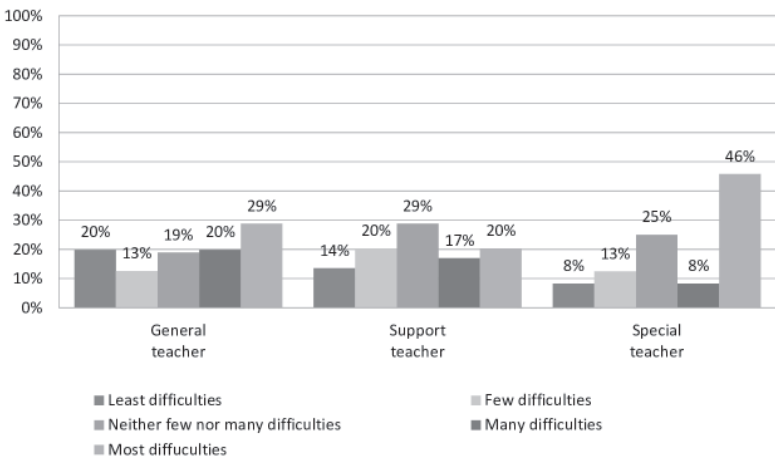


Figure 7. Difficulties of teachers in working with children from refugee families in the compared groups of teachers.

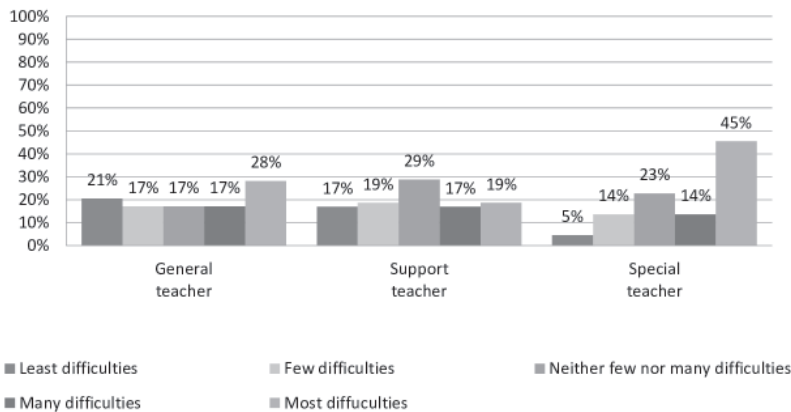


Figure 8. Difficulties of teachers in working with children from national and ethnic minority families in the compared groups of teachers

Teachers' emotional intelligence and social competences in working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds

We analysed differences in the level of emotional intelligence and social competences of the respondents, and whether they were related to the type of school or teacher. The comparisons made with the use of the

non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal statistically significant differences between these groups. Therefore, an attempt was made to find a different perspective for the collected data.

For this purpose, we used questions from the proprietary questionnaire about the willingness to work, assessment of the level of one's own preparedness and the declared degree of difficulty in working with SEN children from refugee families, from national minorities and from ethnic minorities, which the respondents answered on a five-point scale. On the basis of the data collected within each of these groups, teachers were classified into one of the three categories: (1) having a low level of a given characteristic, e.g. reluctance to work, a low level of preparedness or many difficulties (answers 1 and 2), (2) neutral level (answer 3) and (3) high level, e.g. of willingness to work, highly prepared or few difficulties (answers 4 and 5). For these groups, the average level of emotional intelligence and social competences were compared again. The analysis was carried out using the Kruskal-Wallis test, while for complementary pairwise comparisons we used the Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc method (Figure 10). The division of the respondents according to the degree of willingness (lack, neutral, high) and experienced difficulties (small, average, high) did not allow us to observe statistically significant differences between the compared groups. On the other hand, in the case of the division of teachers according to the level of preparedness to work with children from refugee families, there was a statistically significant difference between the compared groups in terms of the general level of social competences ($\chi^2(2) = 9.243$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2p = 0.036$) and competence in situations of close interpersonal contact ($\chi^2(2) = 13.756$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2p = 0.059$). Teachers who feel prepared to work with this group of children obtained higher scores both in terms of the general level of social competences ($M = 181.33$; $SD = 25.02$) and in situations requiring close interpersonal contact ($M = 46.35$; $SD = 5.83$) than teachers who considered themselves unprepared in this respect (respectively: $MSC = 170.04$; $SDSC = 23.29$ and $MInt = 42.37$; $SDInt = 6.01$).

Table 2. Emotional intelligence and social competencies in groups of teachers with varying degrees of difficulties in work with students with children from refugee families (n1 = 122, n2 = 36, n3 = 44) and with children from national and ethnic minorities (n1 = 116, n2 = 38, n3 = 47).

Type of SEN	Variable ^a	Unprepared (1)		Neutral (2)		Prepared (3)		χ^2	p	η_p^2	Adj. p (post hoc tests)		
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				1 vs 2	1 vs 3	2 vs 3
RF	EI	20.64	3.90	21.00	4.19	21.32	4.53	1.283	0.526	-	-	-	-
	OTHERS	12.75	2.68	13.31	2.81	12.82	3.08	1.653	0.437	-	-	-	-
	I	8.46	1.96	8.19	2.19	9.07	2.13	5.065	0.079	-	-	-	-
	SC	17.04	23.29	177.89	19.01	181.33	25.02	9.243	0.010**	0.036	0.148	0.019*	1.000
	Int	42.37	6.01	44.47	6.50	46.35	5.83	13.756	0.001***	0.059	0.096	0.002**	0.993
	SE	51.55	9.15	54.66	7.86	55.00	9.32	5.672	0.059	-	-	-	-
	A	45.3	7.21	47.03	5.47	47.81	8.36	5.196	0.074	-	-	-	-
NEM	EI	20.59	3.91	20.66	4.10	21.62	4.50	2.410	0.300	-	-	-	-
	OTHERS	12.73	2.68	12.87	2.78	13.11	3.08	0.763	0.683	-	-	-	-
	I	8.41	1.98	8.34	2.07	9.02	2.19	3.546	.170	-	-	-	-
	SC	170.95	23.59	176.68	20.54	179.11	24.50	5.283	0.071	-	-	-	-
	Int	42.65	6.02	44.25	6.45	45.57	6.30	8.476	0.014*	0.033	0.298	0.017*	1.000
	SE	51.85	9.28	53.73	8.38	54.59	9.02	3.080	0.214	-	-	-	-
	A	45.50	7.33	47.10	6.11	47.17	7.81	3.043	0.218	-	-	-	-

Note. EI – emotional intelligence; SC – social competences; Int – competences in situations of close interpersonal contact; SE – competences in situations requiring social exposure; A – competences in situations requiring assertiveness; RF – refugee families; NEM – national and ethnic minorities. Statistically significant differences are in bold typeface.

^a The analysis excluded respondents with missing data on at least one of the scales.

* $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .05$.

Findings

An analysis of data relating to actual work experience of teaching students from refugee families or families from national and ethnic minorities, regardless of the type of teacher, reveals that the respondents' experience is very limited and is no longer than 5 years. It seems significant in the situation of the new reality in Polish schools after February 24th, 2022. In our research the number of teachers willing to work with students from refugee families was the same as those who were unwilling. Among teachers from mainstream schools, there was the greatest number of those willing to teach this group of students, but also the greatest number of those who were unwilling. The data we collected exposed a lack of preparedness to work with students from refugee families, as declared by the teachers. The greatest challenges are reported by teachers of special and mainstream schools. Few felt prepared to work with these students. The results relating to how the teachers assess their preparedness to work with students from families belonging to national and ethnic minorities are again similar to the data with reference to refugee students. The analysis of data relating to the challenges of working with children from refugee families and children from national and ethnic minorities allowed us to conclude that regardless of the type of teacher, the respondents face challenges in teaching and educating culturally diverse students.

Another analysis we conducted aimed to determine differences in the area of the teachers' emotional intelligence and social competences. The data collected allowed us to observe that statistically significant differences between the groups were only present in the level of preparedness to work with children from refugee families as well as ethnic and national minorities. Teachers who declared being prepared to work with children from refugee families scored higher both on the general level of social competences and in situations requiring a closer interpersonal contact than those who declared a lack of preparedness. It means that individuals with higher general scores in the test are better adapted to coping with social situations. They are thus more effective at functioning in qualitatively diverse social contacts requiring various skills. Moreover, individuals with higher scores on the second scale are better at building closer relations with other people. Teachers who believed that they were prepared to this type of work scored higher on the level of social competence than those who declared that they were not prepared to work with these students.

Discussion and conclusion

Personal and social competences are important in the work of all teachers. Of equal importance is the intercultural competence, which facilitates contact between the teacher and students with diverse social experiences and from diverse cultural backgrounds (Januszczyńska and Author2 2017). According to scholars (Ergur 2009; Jennings and Greenberg 2009), teachers who can recognise emotions of their students and understand their source and mechanisms, know how to skilfully motivate students to behave adequately at school. Showing support and sensitivity contributes to building a bond between the teacher and students, which seems particularly important in the case of children who are discovering their new environment of daily functioning – the new school, and are negotiating their place and position within it (Badowska, 2015).

The study revealed that teachers had little experience of working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The group studied showed indecision as regards their willingness to work with culturally diverse students (the number of proponents was similar to the number of opponents). Lack of preparedness to work with students from culturally diverse backgrounds was particularly visible among teachers of special schools, while teachers of mainstream schools were second in this regard. It also seems that the respondents confused the terms referring to students from national minorities and refugees. They found it difficult to determine which groups in Poland belong to national minorities, and which to ethnic minorities. This fact draws attention to the culturally homogenous school environment and the language of school education (Pamuła-Behrens, 2018), which is still dominated by the classic division into Polish and foreign students.

It is important to observe that in the reality of Polish schools, culturally diverse students can also have other, additional difficulties in functioning, for instance disabilities. The study revealed that before 2022 not many of these students were present in special schools, or even integrative schools, while teachers working there did not feel prepared and did not want to work with them.

The need to understand the importance and recognise the complex challenges and skills required to work with students with multiple educational problems, necessitates a new postulate directed at universities and schools. It particularly refers to the preparedness of teachers to work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds who may have such multiple educational needs. This training should be based on their social experience (Szczurek-Boruta, 2013), listening to their opinions and supporting them in

building co-operation with the students, parents and the school environment (in the area of communication with children's parents/legal guardians). It is thus necessary to fundamentally rethink intercultural education in teacher training.

Efforts should be made in the area of organisation and support, perception of the school as a participant in social change (Kwieciński, 2009) and building good school practices within an inclusive pedagogical approach. What it means in practice is the necessity to implement multidimensional activities supporting prospective and professionally active teachers in their work in increasingly diversified schools and in the clash (of education) with students with multiple educational needs. This subject seems not only new, but also unrecognised due to the interdisciplinary character of this phenomenon and the necessity to engage more deeply in diagnosing special educational needs other than foreign children's linguistic challenges. It also seems that due to lack of knowledge about "how to deal with it", "where to look for adequate support" and varying approaches of teachers towards foreign children, this subject was also swept under the proverbial rug. It is more difficult in Poland, in as much as the system of supporting students with adaptation challenges and those who have changed their educational environment due to migration or refugeeism, was during the implementation of this study undeveloped. It is thus difficult to claim (based on the results), that support to these students who have either one additional challenge or multiple special educational needs was provided.

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