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*Neuroticism and the Sense of Efficacy  
of a Special Education Teacher*

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Neurotyczność a poczucie skuteczności nauczycieli szkół specjalnych

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ABSTRACT

The work of teachers in special schools can be particularly emotionally and motivationally demanding. Neuroticism and a sense of efficacy are important psychological resources in the teaching profession, especially for teachers who work only with students with special educational needs. The aim of the study was to explore whether neuroticism is a predictor of the sense of efficacy of teachers from special schools and whether there is any differentiation in terms of seniority. Sample consisting of 210 female teachers aged 25–65 ( $M = 43.23$ ,  $SD = 8.35$ ) was examined. The following questionnaires were applied: NEO-FFI Personality Inventory; Generalized Efficacy Scale GSES. The predictor of self-efficacy is decreasing neuroticism. Teachers with more than 15 years of experience do not have significantly lower neuroticism and self-efficacy compared to teachers with less than 15 years of experience. It is possible to predict a decrease in the sense of effectiveness of teachers of special schools if their neuroticism increases. These conclusions can be used in occupational psychology and in psychoeducational interactions with teachers of special schools in the area of their soft skills.

**Keywords:** neuroticism; self-efficacy; seniority; special school

## INTRODUCTION

Diagnosis of the current personality condition of teachers fits into the interdisciplinary trend of psycho-pedagogical monitoring of the style of functioning of Polish schools (Gaś, 2001) and at the same time into the trend of pedeutology (Wiatrowski, 2007). Both of these trends deal with issues related to personality and teacher education in the context of improving the professional development of teachers (Gaś, 2001). Personality background is a psychological predictor of teacher effectiveness and professional satisfaction (Gaś, 2001) and therefore it is the object of interest of psychologists. It should also be the object of interest of both candidates and students of pedagogy or those who plan their professional career in education, especially in special schools, and people who plan and support various forms of improving the professional development of teachers.

The most interesting from a psychological perspective are the studies on teachers' personality in the context of personality theory (see Gaś, 2001; Poraj, 2009) and this will be taken as the leading one in this article. Discoveries from personality theory deserve closer attention from educational psychology in the pursuit of a better explanation of the role of teachers' personality in the educational process (Göncz, 2017). Special education includes special kindergartens, primary and secondary education and special vocational education, including a school preparing for work for people who require special support and supervision, as well as rehabilitation and educational centers, school and educational centers, youth educational centers, youth sociotherapy centers and special schools at hospitals and sanatoriums. The daily work of teachers in special education with students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, mental disorders, social maladjustment, behavioral disorders or other types of disabilities, including multiple disabilities, can be very emotionally and motivationally demanding. Teachers of special schools are particularly emotionally involved and experience disproportions between the pedagogical effort put into their work and the effect, which is sometimes lower than expected, which can contribute to teachers' emotional overload (Paszkievicz, 2014; Sęk, 2000).

Emotions in teachers' work have a twofold meaning. As, on the one hand, it provides a climate for the quality of these interactions, and on the other hand, it can lead to severe stress and to emotional exhaustion. This topic is widely discussed in the pedagogical literature (Bakker, Demerouti, 2017; Grabowiec, 2013; Przybylska, 2006; Twardowska-Staszek, Alberska, 2020). The workload, according to 86% of teachers, is higher than in other professions (Pyżalski, 2010). Kwiatkowski (2018) emphasises the importance of an optimal match between personal potential and psychological well-being in the choice of a teacher's career path. It is also worth noting that the ability to manage emotions is essential as a resource for a teacher in any type of school, but especially in a special school.

Awareness of one's own personality traits as a basis for managing emotions enables teachers to build a favourable educational atmosphere and take care of their own psychological well-being (Grzegorzewska, 2012; Przybylska, 2006). Although this topic is addressed in Polish pedagogical research (Kwiatkowski, 2018), there is a lack of monitoring empirical analyses of selected aspects of special school teachers' personalities.

Teachers' personality traits and the construct of self-efficacy play an important role in the motivational aspect of their specific and exhaustive work with students with special educational needs and the creation of an appropriate classroom climate. Although this aspect is sometimes difficult to measure, it is of great importance for educational effectiveness, especially when working with the youngest children and students with special support needs (Twardowska-Staszek, Alberska, 2020). In the context of research on teachers (Göncz, 2017), this study focuses on the analysis of the personal background of teachers. This issue is relevant for educational psychology, as it allows for a better understanding of the role of educators' personalities in job effectiveness and their professional satisfaction (Bernacka et al., 2019; Göncz, 2017). In view of the trait approach to personality research recommended in the psychological literature (Göncz, 2017), the present study is based on the concept of personality traits extracted from the Big Five model.

The Big Five theory (Costa, McCrae, 1995; Siuta, 2006) distinguishes five main personality dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. These traits describe individual differences in the way people think, feel and act, representing a predisposition to certain behaviours in similar situations or generalising to other situations. The more severe a trait is, the more likely the associated reactions are to occur. Importantly, these traits are universal, meaning that they can be observed in people all over the world. Neuroticism refers to differences in emotion regulation and mental stability, as well as the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness or frustration, which regulates an individual's thinking and behaviour. Individuals with a high level of neuroticism often cope less well with stress and tend to be withdrawn and helpless in difficult situations (Siuta, 2006). Within neuroticism, six aspects are distinguished: anxiety, aggressive hostility, depressiveness, excessive self-criticism, impulsivity and hypersensitivity (McCrae, Costa, 2005; Zawadzki et al., 1995). It is worth recalling that anxiety is the tendency to feel tense, anxious, nervous and prone to worry; aggressive hostility is the readiness to be irritated, frustrated; depressivity is the susceptibility to feeling guilty, helpless, depressed. Self-criticism, on the other hand, channels feelings of shame, fear of ridicule. Impulsivity describes the difficulty in controlling desires and needs. Hypersensitivity is a vulnerability to stress and a tendency to panic in difficult situations (Siuta, 2006). The personality tendency to manage emotional energy also translates into a sense of professional self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is a concept defined in the literature as one of the main factors in a person's coping with a difficult situation (Kwiatkowski, 2020). Schwarzer and Fuchs (1996) consider it to be an internal belief in one's own ability to take the necessary action in difficult situations, it represents a general human disposition that is acquired and modified throughout life. Locke and Latham (1990) emphasise that the stronger a person's self-efficacy beliefs are, the higher the goals people set for themselves and, consequently, the stronger their subsequent commitment to planned actions, even in the face of unexpected difficulties encountered. A strong sense of this competence induces people to be more persistent and to choose more ambitious tasks (Juczyński, 2000). According to Ogińska-Bulik and Kaflik-Pieróg (2006), self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to complete a given task in a specific life situation. The belief in self-efficacy determines the taking of action, persistence in pursuing a goal, coping with obstacles and failures encountered, as well as the intensity of stress a person is able to withstand (Oleś, 2008). According to Goleman (1997), a sense of efficacy represents a belief in the effectiveness of one's own efforts. It is not a realistic assessment of one's own abilities, but more a belief in what one can do. He points out that it is necessary to believe in one's abilities in order to be able to use them to their full potential, so not just to possess them.

A sense of efficacy in the case of teachers, especially those working with people with special educational needs, seems all the more important in terms of the outcomes of their work, as well as their mental health and job satisfaction (Paszkievicz, 2014). Self-efficacy has been defined within Bandura's (1997) social-cognitive theory as "the belief in one's own capabilities, ability to organise and take action towards a goal" (p. 3). This is the leading concept in this thesis and will therefore be presented. This construct reflects the subject's self-assessment of his or her ability to achieve his or her goals, his or her ability to cope with specific, difficult life situations and the individual's belief in his or her ability to influence the surrounding environment. A person, thanks to his or her cognitive abilities, can thus control and influence changes in his or her environment, becoming an active creator of his or her life. It should be noted that self-efficacy is an important mechanism of self-regulation, but also a factor that differentiates people's behaviour. A high sense of competence in this area has a positive effect on motivation, faster decision-making and the initiation of action. Low ones, on the other hand, can have a negative impact on a person's emotional and somatic state, which is not conducive to achieving life goals. Crucially, self-efficacy belief is a dynamic construct that can be developed through an individual's ability to reflect and learn through experience (Bandura, 1997). Bandura points out that people may be convinced that a particular course of action leads to certain outcomes, but at the same time may doubt that they will be able to undertake it. An efficacy expectation is an individual's belief that he

or she will be able to successfully perform the behaviour necessary to produce those outcomes. The strength of the self-efficacy belief, in turn, influences whether an individual will attempt to deal with the obstacles encountered. Bandura also notes that people fear and avoid threatening situations if they believe they will not be able to cope with them, conversely if they have a high opinion of their abilities. Self-efficacy belief reduces inhibitions, anticipatory anxiety and influences effort and persistence when faced with the prospect of expected success (Bandura, 2007). It is the salt of motivation.

Bandura identifies four main sources for the formation of this construct. The first is task achievement. Positive experiences of one's own abilities in difficult and new situations, successfully completed tasks create self-efficacy beliefs and have positive connotations for the future. On the other hand, the experience of failure in performance causes a loss of confidence in one's own abilities and may result in the person adopting a withdrawn or passive attitude in the future (Oleś, 2008). Once established, self-efficacy expectations tend to generalise to related situations. Another source of the sense of efficacy is vicarious experiences. The phenomenon of behaviour modelling, experience drawn from observing other people, can enhance and positively influence self-esteem, as well as the development of interpersonal relationships (Kozicka, 2004). Through participatory modelling, corrective experience can be gained, enabling behaviour change by confronting fears with reality (Bandura, 2007). Verbal persuasion is important, the intention of which is to convince the person that he or she can trust him or herself and cope with challenges. It is, so to speak, an instruction to behave effectively and to justify the costs that an individual incurs in a given action (Oleś, 2008). By means of suggestion, people are led to believe that they can successfully cope with tasks. Verbal persuasion can also take the form of praising a person for performing a certain action positively and playing an empowering role (Niewiadomska, Chwaszcz, 2010). However, Bandura (2007) points out the low potential of this factor in situations where it only raises expectations of effectiveness rather than providing authentic confirmatory experiences. A fourth source of the sense of efficacy is the state of emotional arousal, physiological – in a stressful situation there is physiological arousal, which can result in a low sense of efficacy and the unlocking of defence mechanisms (Kozicka, 2004). In a state of anxiety, tasks are generally performed ineffectively, and the repetition of such situations may lead to a reinforcement of the sense of ineffectiveness of task performance in specific types of situations (Gasiul, 2020). A positive mood enhances perceived layers of efficacy and releases energy for action, and conversely, a bad mood diminishes this feeling (Bańka, 2005).

In conclusion, among teachers' psychological resources, the validity of monitoring such personality constructs as lower levels of neuroticism and self-efficacy should be pointed out.

## RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the study was to explore whether neuroticism is a predictor of the sense of efficacy of teachers from special schools and whether there is any differentiation in terms of seniority. To our knowledge, this has not been the subject of research in relation to special education teachers. The research problems of the work are:

1. Whether neuroticism is a predictor of the sense of efficacy of teachers from special schools?
2. Whether special education teachers with more than 15 years of experience and those with less than 15 years of experience differ in terms of neuroticism and self-efficacy?

A study among 390 Polish teachers using the NEO-FFI (Poraj, 2009) indicates that women show higher levels of neuroticism than men. Similar results were obtained in analyses involving 258 teachers (Bernacka et al., 2019) and in foreign studies (Fatemi, Sazegar, 2016). Regardless of gender, higher feelings of professional efficacy are associated with lower levels of neuroticism (Poraj, 2009). Professional burnout among teachers is the same for women and men (Poraj, 2009), but those with higher neuroticism are more prone to stress (Kokkinos, 2011) and professional burnout (Chmielewska, 2021; Kurowicka, 2015; Manlove, 1993; Piedmont, 1993; Watson et al., 1994).

Analyses of neuroticism in future teachers indicate that too few students are characterised by desirable, i.e. low, levels of this trait (Kwiatkowski, 2018). In contrast, research (Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023) shows that low levels of neuroticism in teachers are associated with increasing emotional intelligence. Educators with more than 20 years of seniority show lower neuroticism, including lower vulnerability to depression, and higher emotional intelligence, which manifests itself in better control of emotions. It can be assumed that longer seniority goes hand in hand with the development of emotion management skills if the severity of neuroticism in teachers is low. A study conducted by Twardowska-Staszek and Alberska (2020) among special education teachers showed high emotion control skills. Teachers scored average in empathy, emotional self-awareness, acceptance and expression of emotions, as well as their use of emotions in practice. In addition, longer seniority was found to be a factor for higher emotional intelligence (Twardowska-Staszek, Alberska, 2020).

Nowosad (2023) sought to determine the role of sense of control and self-efficacy in explaining teachers' hopes for success in their careers. The analyses conducted showed that the increasing sense of internal control and self-efficacy of the educators surveyed was accompanied by increasing levels of their hope for success, particularly their ability to find solutions. Wierzejska (2022) found in her study that the sense of efficacy decreases with an increase in perceived

professional stress. Respondents who were found to have a low sense of efficacy were characterised by a lack of confidence in their own life and work competences and declared a lack of influence over work situations and control over events. Another study (Cuprjak, Szmalec, 2021) on teachers' sense of efficacy in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic found that teachers' sense of efficacy was at its lowest level in years.

## METHOD

### Measures

Data were collected using the NEO-FFI and GSES.

**Neuroticism:** We used the NEO-FFI personality questionnaire by McCrae and Costa in the Polish translation by Zawadzki et al. (1998). The scale consists of five subscales: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. The scale includes 60 statements, for example "Often feels tense and nervous". The items are rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha for NEO-FFI was at 0.68–0.82.

**Self-efficacy:** We used Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale GSES (Juczyński, 2000). The scale includes 10 statements, for example "I can stay calm in the face of difficulties because I can rely on my coping skills". The items are rated on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*no*) to 4 (*yes*). Cronbach's alpha was at 0.85.

### Participants

Sample consisting of 210 female teachers aged 25–65 ( $M = 43.23$ ,  $SD = 8.35$ ) was examined. Only female teachers were invited to participate in the study. The female teachers surveyed 100% work in special school and have higher education. In the study group, 45% had more than 15 years of work experience and 55% had less than 15 years of work experience ( $M = 16.00$ ;  $SD = 8.00$ ).

### Data analysis procedure

A purposive sampling method was used. The criterion for selecting the subjects was the fact of being a teacher employed in a special school and voluntary consent to participate in the study. The study used the snowball method to collect data and used an internet link. Confidentiality of information was ensured through the anonymity of responses. Data was collected from February to May 2024. The collected data was analyzed using the IBM SPSS statistical program. We used regression analysis the input method and Anova variance.

## RESULTS

The analysis (Table 1) showed that the model tested was a good fit to the data. The  $R^2$  coefficient value of 0.16 indicates that the variables in the model predict 16% of the variation in self-efficacy. Neuroticism proved to be significant predictors in the model. The negative value of the standardized *Beta* ( $\beta = -0.24$ ) coefficients indicates an low level of self-efficacy as neuroticism growing. The statistical analyses presented a Table 2 indicate that the groups with seniority of more than 15 years and up to 15 years are no different from each other in neuroticism and self-efficacy.

Table 1. Results of the regression analysis for the self-efficacy

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
$F(1; 210) = 18.09; p < 0.001; R^2 \text{ adj.} = 0.16$					
Constant	113.04	27.32		10.73	0.000
Neuroticism	-0.37	0.25	-0.24	-1.42	0.013

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 2. Results of the significance of differences for personality variables in the context of work experience

Variable	Between groups seniority average square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Self-efficacy	16.77	4.26	0.056
Neuroticism	32.41	2.26	0.089

Source: Authors' own study.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the study was to explore whether neuroticism is a predictor of the sense of efficacy of teachers from special schools and whether there is any differentiation in terms of seniority. The results presented here confirm the importance of neuroticism in relation to teachers' sense of efficacy. The low intensity of neuroticism in the sphere of teachers' emotional functioning is in line with the current state of research on this topic (Dawda, Hart, 2000; Petrides, Furnham, 2001; Saklofske et al., 2003; Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023). Research by Nowosad (2023) or Twardowska-Staszek and Alberska (2020) show that special education teachers are characterised by high skills in controlling their own emotions, at the core of which, adding here a consideration based on the results of our own research, is the personality trait neuroticism. The lower the severity of neuroticism, the more likely teachers are to manifest self-control, calmness, quick emotional recovery, weaker experiencing of unpleasant emotions and anxiety (Jaworowska, 2012; Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023). This trait contributes to the



development of a sense of efficacy understood as a belief in one's own capabilities, abilities to perform a given task in a specific situation and to undertake such actions (Bandura, 1997). Our own research shows that the higher the neuroticism, the more, although weakly, the self-efficacy of teachers working in special schools decreases. 15% of the observed variation in self-efficacy can be explained by neuroticism as an explanatory variable.

Self-efficacy belief is a dynamic construct that can be developed through an individual's ability to reflect and learn through experience (Bandura, 1997). Teachers working in special schools experiencing, arguably, more frequent failure in performance due to the lower cognitive abilities of their students may lose confidence in their own abilities, which may result in them adopting a withdrawn or passive professional attitude in the future (Oleś, 2008). This is a psychological mechanism that perpetuates itself in the social learning process, usually generalising to related situations and becoming a subjective competence, a personal resource of the teacher.

In relation to the above information, another conclusion summarizing our own research indicates that teachers of special schools with more than 15 years of experience and less than 15 years do not differ from each other in neuroticism or sense of self-efficacy. In light of the research results, it can be stated that most likely people with the desired intensity of neuroticism and sense of self-efficacy entered the profession. In light of the research results to date (Kwiatkowski, 2018; Nowosad, 2023; Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023; Twardowska-Staszek, Alberska, 2020), it can be assumed that teachers have a personality background that is adequately adapted to difficult tasks and it does not decrease despite very emotionally and motivationally engaging work with students with special educational needs. The low intensity of neuroticism helps to take an attitude of challenge, mobilize in the face of tasks, and a sense of efficacy additionally strengthens their motivation to work (Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023). It encourages teachers of special schools to be more persistent and to undertake more difficult and ambitious tasks (Juczyński, 2000). Neuroticism is negatively correlated with success at work (Göncz, 2017). Low levels of neuroticism, together with a sense of effectiveness, create an emotional and motivational base that sustains motivation and the quality of teaching activities (Bernacka et al., 2019; Grabowiec, 2013; Sterlus, Bernacka, 2023) in the studied group of teachers of special schools. The obtained results correspond with the results of Nowosad (2023) and allow us to conclude that the teachers studied demonstrate a sense of self-efficacy adequate to their work. The belief that a teacher will cope when faced with a task, a pedagogical challenge, especially in a special school, allows us to propose that he will be positively disposed and will achieve success in the face of personal struggle with the realities in the educational space of the school. Possessing such personality resources, teachers become more involved in activities, even in the face of unexpected difficulties or lack of expected successes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the importance of the personality background in teachers' work facilitates the development of psychoeducational activities aimed at this professional group, especially in special education. First of all, in the diagnosis and career counseling, attention should be paid to the importance of the expected low level of neuroticism and self-efficacy as components of personality that support the profession of a teacher in a special school. In a broader perspective, they support high quality work and professional self-fulfillment of teachers. Moreover, at the stage of pedagogical education, it is worth including workshops aimed at strengthening the sense of self-efficacy. The professional experience of teachers in special schools is not a significant factor that reduces their sense of efficacy at work, which may suggest an adequate selection of people to work in this profession in the studied group.

The results of our own research can be helpful in more accurate perception of the specific functioning of teachers, inspire self-development activities and support professional development of teachers of special schools. In the cognitive sense, they can be a guide to determining further directions of psychological research on the personality of teachers.

It is worth noting some limitations of this study. First of all, the study group consisted exclusively of women, which is justified by the high feminization of this profession. Previous analyses indicate that women show a higher level of neuroticism than men (Bernacka et al., 2019; Poraj, 2009). Therefore, future studies should take into account an even division of gender to determine the significance of this variable in the results. In addition, future analyses could be based on longitudinal studies, which would allow for better tracking of changes over time, especially in the context of the role of seniority in self-sufficiency. Another limitation is the method of recruiting participants – random selection via the Internet, including the “snowball” technique. This may increase the likelihood of participation of people with specific personality traits, which may be reflected in the results. In addition, it is worth considering other variables in future studies, including their mediating or moderating role in the sense of self-efficacy of special education teachers.

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## ABSTRAKT

Praca nauczycieli w szkołach specjalnych bywa szczególnie obciążająca emocjonalnie, ale też motywacyjnie. Niskie nasilenie neurotyczności i poczucie skuteczności są ważnym zasobem psychologicznym w zawodzie nauczyciela, w tym szczególnie nauczyciela, który pracuje tylko z uczniami o specjalnych potrzebach edukacyjnych. Celem badań było określenie, czy neurotyczność jest predyktorem poczucia skuteczności nauczycieli ze szkół specjalnych oraz czy występuje ich zróżnicowanie, biorąc pod uwagę staż pracy. Przebadano 210 nauczycielek w wieku 25–65 lat ( $M = 43,23$ ;  $SD = 8,35$ ). W badaniach zastosowano: Inwentarz Osobowości NEO-FFI, Skalę Uogólnionej Skuteczności GSES. Predyktorem poczucia własnej skuteczności jest obniżający się neurotyzm. Nauczyciele o stażu pracy powyżej 15 lat nie mają istotnie niższej neurotyczności oraz poczucia własnej skuteczności w porównaniu do nauczycieli o stażu pracy poniżej 15 lat. Można prognozować obniżanie się poczucia skuteczności nauczycieli szkół specjalnych, jeśli ich neurotyczność będzie wzrastała. Wnioski te mogą znaleźć zastosowanie w psychologii pracy oraz w oddziaływaniach psychoedukacyjnych z nauczycielami szkół specjalnych w zakresie ich kompetencji miękkich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neurotyczność; poczucie własnej skuteczności; staż pracy; szkoły specjalne