

Self-Efficacy of School Special Educators in the Field of Pedagogical Diagnostics of the Family Environment

Tomáš Turzák¹
Radka Teleková²

¹ University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra; Faculty of Education; Department of Pedagogy; Dražovská 4, 949 01 Nitra; tturzak@ukf.sk

² University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra; Faculty of Education; Department of Pedagogy; Dražovská 4, 949 01 Nitra; rtelekova@ukf.sk

Grant: VEGA 1/0087/25

Název grantu: Self-efficacy of Teachers and Educators for Work with Family.

Oborové zaměření: AM – Pedagogy and education

© GRANT Journal, MAGNANIMITAS Assn.

Abstract The study addresses the issue of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. The aim of the qualitative research was to identify the key factors that determine the level of self-assessment among school special educators in the field of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. The research sample consisted of 15 school special educators working in different types of schools, with whom two online focus groups were conducted. The findings identified the main determinants of school special educators' self-assessment (self-confidence) in this area. The analysis of the focus group data revealed four main categories influencing school special educators' self-efficacy in assessing pupils' family environments: (1) communication skills and pre-service training; (2) practice and experience in family assessment; (3) social factors; and (4) personal vision and professional ambitions. The results showed that practical experience with parents, communication competencies and support from the school environment play an important role in the perception of professional competence. The findings confirm the need for further professional development and the expansion of practical experience in this area of educational activity, particularly for beginning school special educators.

Keywords school special educators, special educators' competencies, pedagogical diagnostics of the family, self-efficacy, self-assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary education and pre-service teacher training, increasing emphasis is placed on the integration of teacher's professional expertise, personal characteristics and self-regulatory mechanisms. Among the key concepts in this regard is teacher's perceived self-efficacy. Drawing on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-efficacy refers to teachers' professional belief in their own ability to successfully organise and carry out professional activities in order to achieve desired educational outcomes for pupils (Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023).

These beliefs fundamentally influence cognitive processes, behavior as well as the goals individuals choose, and the amount of effort they invest in achieving them. In the school environment, teacher

self-efficacy is a key factor in the successful implementation of educational processes (Kazanopoulos et al., 2022).

Teacher's work is conceptualized through professional competencies, which represent an integrated set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In the context of this study, particular attention is paid to diagnostic competence. Pedagogical diagnostics is no longer perceived merely as a summative process aimed at grading (classification) but rather as a continuous and formative process of identifying the conditions, course and outcomes of education (Dorozhovets & Hladush, 2021).

Diagnostics occupies a crucial position in educational work, both in the domain of knowledge construction and in educational practice. It initiates all other pedagogical activities, guides them, and is continuously refined throughout these processes. An educator's professionalism is demonstrated, among other things, through their knowledge of pedagogical diagnostics, their ability to apply it effectively, and their competent and ethical conduct in relation to diagnostic activities (Opozda, 2019).

One of the most important and demanding sub-competencies within pedagogical diagnostics is the diagnostics of the pupil's family environment. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the school and the family represent two key microsystems whose interaction (the mesosystem) fundamentally influences child development. According to Wray et al. (2022), three key sets of competencies are essential for functioning effectively in contemporary education focused on inclusion: content and pedagogical knowledge; classroom management; and the ability to cooperate with parents and teacher assistants.

While diagnostic activities are important for teachers in general, they constitute a cornerstone of the work of school special educators. The development of diagnostic competence, with particular attention to in-depth diagnostics of the family environment, therefore emerges as a key professional priority. When pedagogical and professional staff possess a high level of self-efficacy in this area, the school environment ceases to be a place of selection and becomes a space for genuine inclusion (Dorozhovets & Hladush, 2021). Current educational discourse explicitly addresses the discrepancy between the demands placed on teachers' diagnostic competence and the practical limitations of educational

settings, including large class sizes and limited time allocated to in-depth pedagogical diagnostics.

Empirical findings (Kazanopoulos et al., 2022) demonstrate a significantly higher level of perceived self-efficacy in key areas of inclusive education. This difference is explained by the more targeted focus of their pre-service and academic preparation, which aims to equip future professionals with the competencies necessary to work effectively in heterogeneous and inclusive educational environments.

The literature contains a number of studies addressing teacher self-efficacy with a particular focus on inclusive education and the pupil's family environment. Savolainen et al. (2012) identified professional preparation, continuing education, and support as important determinants of the level of teacher self-efficacy in inclusive education. A higher level of perceived teacher self-efficacy has been associated with more active participation of family members in the educational process (Krizman, 2013), as well as with more developed forms of cooperation between schools and families. Hansuvadha (2009) points to the limited amount of research linking teacher self-efficacy with the quality of family-school relationships, although such connections can reasonably be assumed.

The present study focuses on the self-efficacy of school special educators, specifically in relation to the diagnostics of pupil's family environment. The self-efficacy of school special educators develops gradually, and its level is conditioned by multiple factors. Concerning professional growth, both the level of competencies and the degree of self-reflection of the school special educators increase. Based on these theoretical foundations, the present study further explores this issue through empirical research.

2. METHODS

The aim of the present qualitative study was to identify the factors determining the level of school special educators' self-assessment of their professional competence in the field of pedagogical assessment of the family environment.

Participants:

The sample consisted of 15 school special educators working in different types of schools. The sampling procedure was non-random. Two online focus group interviews involving 15 school special educators were conducted until the criterion of theoretical data saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The authors of this study served as moderators of the focus groups.

Methods of data collection:

Given the nature of the research problem and the aim to explore the unique experience of school special educators, the method of qualitative focus group was employed. Qualitative data are authentic, complex and rich, providing valuable insight into the phenomenon under investigation. A set of open-ended questions was developed based on previous research in this area. Group interactions that emerged during the moderated interviews added an important dynamic to the exploration of the phenomenon – anything that had been said could be confirmed, supported or challenged within the group discussion. The data of the online focus groups were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Methods of data analysis:

The data was analyzed using the grounded theory approach proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1997). Two independent coders analyzed the data to identify as many aspects of studied

phenomenon as possible, and to enhance the credibility of the findings. Their preliminary results were subsequently compared and discussed in order to reach a shared interpretation of the phenomenon. They used multi-level coding of participants' statements. In the next phase, central categories and subcategories were developed, relationships among them were explored and the findings were incorporated into a conceptual model (Miovský, 2006).

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the focus group data revealed three main categories that explain how Slovak school special educators perceive their self-efficacy and their role as professionals responsible for assessing pupils' family environments. These categories include communication skills – pre-service training versus practical experience, social factors as determinants of school special educators' self-efficacy, and the personal vision and professional ambitions of school special educators. An overview of the main categories and subcategories is presented in the following model (Fig. 1). The relationships between the categories and their definitions are briefly described below.

3.1 Communication Skills – Pre-Service Training versus Practical Experience

- pre-service training in communication with families,
- personal professional experience,
- the ability to handle sensitive information,
- the ability to manage conflict situations and communicate effectively.

3.2 Social Factors as Determinants of the Self-Efficacy of School Special Educators

- diverse types of parents,
- family – parents' unwillingness,
- school – the approach of the school leadership,
- the type of school.

3.3 Personal Vision and School Special Educators' Professional Ambitions

- attitude and activity,
- improvement of diagnostic competencies related to the pupil's family environment.

Figure 1: Main Categories and Subcategories of Factors Determining School Special Educators' Self-Efficacy

3.1 Communication Skills – Pre-Service Training versus Practical Experience

The self-perception of school special educators as “professionals responsible for assessing pupil's family environment” is primarily shaped by the quality of their pre-service training and their practical experience.

An important factor influencing the self-efficacy of school special educators is the limitations resulting from their professional preparation, particularly in the area of communication with families. Respondents participating in the focus groups pointed out that working with parents and assessing pupil's family environment

require specific competencies that are not sufficiently developed during university studies. School special educators often perceive a gap between theoretical preparation and the actual demands of professional practice. At the same time, a lack of practical experience in communicating with parents reduces their confidence when dealing with challenging situations.

In this context, respondents emphasized that their **pre-service training** in this area was predominantly theoretical and did not provide sufficient opportunities to practice specific real-life situations. In particular, they highlighted a lack of model interviews, conflict management training and opportunities to reflect on communication with parents. As a result, practical experience played a more significant role in the development of self-efficacy than university preparation itself. Respondents stated that it was often only through direct practical experience that they learnt how to communicate effectively with different types of parents.

Respondents further emphasized the importance of **practical experience as a key source of professional learning**. They stated that many skills were acquired only through practice and highlighted the importance of gradually gaining confidence through real-life situations. At the same time, this process was perceived as demanding and, in some cases, also as a source of uncertainty, particularly at the beginning of their professional careers. *“At university, we learned a lot about diagnostics, but very little about how to talk to a parent who is angry or unwilling to cooperate.”* *“It was only practice that taught me how to respond in real-life situations.”*⁹

An important subcategory was the ability to **work with sensitive information**. Respondents described feelings of uncertainty when communicating serious findings related to the pupil or the family environment. They expressed concerns about using inappropriate wording or being misunderstood by parents. In this regard, they highlighted high demands put on them as well as the importance of empathetic communication with parents.

“Sometimes it is very difficult to tell a parent that the child’s problem may also be related to the situation at home.”
“You have to choose your words very carefully so that the parent does not feel accused.”

Another significant determinant of self-efficacy was the **ability to manage conflict situations**. Educators reported that the most challenging situations arise when parents disagree with diagnostic conclusions, reject the school’s recommendations, or have had negative experience with another school. Increased pressure in such situations may lead to feelings of uncertainty and fear of professional failure.

*“When a parent raises their voice or starts blaming the school, suddenly you are no longer sure how to react appropriately.”*¹²
*“The most difficult thing is to remain calm when a parent refuses any form of cooperation.”*³
*“[...] I do not always know how to conduct a conversation with a parent properly, especially when sensitive topics are involved.”*⁷

The findings highlight the need for targeted preparation of school special educators in the area of working with families, extending beyond the framework of traditional pedagogical competencies. An important part of professional preparation should therefore include practice-oriented communication training, model situations, the development of mediation skills, and supervisory guidance reflecting real-life professional experience.

3.2 Social Factors as Determinants of the Self-Efficacy of School Special Educators

An important category of factors influencing the self-efficacy of school special educators consisted of social factors related to both the family and the school environment. Respondents participating in the focus groups stated that their ability to assess effectively the pupil’s family environment and cooperate with the family is determined not only by their individual competencies but also by broader school conditions, parental attitudes and the family’s social environment. Educators pointed out that the quality of cooperation with families significantly influences their professional confidence, the effectiveness of interventions and their overall perception of their own effectiveness.

One of the most prominent subcategories concerned **different types of parents** and the challenges associated with adopting an individual approach to each family. Respondents pointed to the need to communicate effectively with different types of parents. They emphasized that every family has a unique social and cultural background, which always requires an individual approach. School special educators perceived establishing cooperation as particularly challenging when working with parents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, parents with low level of trust in schools as well as with parents with limited proficiency in Slovak and parents whose previous life experiences had negatively affected their attitudes towards educational institutions.

*“You need to communicate differently with every parent. Some want precise facts, while others mainly need support and understanding. We also have parents from Ukraine who are very reserved, and working with them is much more demanding.”*¹¹
*“The hardest thing is to gain the trust of parents who have already had a negative experience with school.”*¹

A significant barrier on the family side was **parental unwillingness to cooperate**. Respondents stated that some parents refused to follow the recommendations of school special educators regarding how to work with their child at home. In some cases, parents also questioned the professional recommendations of specialists or denied the existence of their child’s special educational needs. Such situations reduced school special educators’ sense of professional efficacy and complicated the implementation of interventions aimed at supporting the pupil.

*“The most difficult thing is when a parent completely denies the problem and refuses any kind of help.”*⁶
*“We have parents who do not attend a single meeting, yet at the same time expect the school to solve everything on its own.”*¹³
*“When parents do not cooperate, you feel that your work has no real impact.”*²

Another significant determinant of self-efficacy involved barriers within the school environment and broader systemic conditions. Respondents pointed out that the effective work of school special educators depends not only on their own competencies but also on the **organizational conditions of the school**, the support provided by school leadership and the overall structure of the educational system. They identified a high administrative workload, insufficient time for individual work with families, and ambiguously defined professional responsibilities as particularly problematic.

*“We spend a lot of time on administration, and then there is not enough space left for actual work with families.”*⁵
*“Sometimes we feel that the system expects too much from us, but does not provide clear rules.”*¹⁰

The **approach of school leadership** also emerged as an important factor. Respondents emphasized that support from school leadership significantly influences their professional confidence. They perceived leadership positively when it respected the professional opinions of school special educators and created opportunities for communication with families. Conversely, insufficient support from school leadership was associated with feelings of isolation and a lack of professional recognition.

*"When the school leadership trusts our work, you feel more confident also in working with families."*⁷

*"If the leadership does not realize the importance of our work, it is difficult to implement the necessary measures."*¹¹

The findings also suggested that **the type of school** in which a school special educator works may influence their self-efficacy. Respondents working in special schools stated that these institutions place greater emphasis on systematic assessment and more intensive cooperation with families. This suggests that the subjective perception of the school special educator's role in relation to parents varies according to the school environment and the special educational needs of the pupils.

*"In a special school, cooperation with the family is a natural part of the work, and parents are more prepared to communicate."*³

*"In a mainstream school, we have much less space to devote in-depth attention to one family."*¹⁴

The findings suggest that the self-efficacy of school special educators is significantly shaped by the social context of both the school and the family. Effective assessment of the family environment therefore requires not only the educator's individual professional competencies but also supportive systemic conditions and adequate support from school leadership.

3.3 Personal Vision and Professional Ambitions of School Special Educators

An important category influencing the self-efficacy of school special educators was their personal vision of the profession and their professional ambitions. The respondents' statements suggest that they do not perceive pedagogical assessment of the family environment merely as a technical or administrative part of their work, but rather as an important tool for supporting the overall development of the pupil.

Respondents also pointed out that high-quality assessment of the family environment requires not only professional knowledge but also an appropriate personal attitude of the educator (**attitude and activity**), a high level of empathy, the ability to communicate with parents and a willingness to continuously develop their professional competencies. They perceived this area of practice as demanding, yet at the same time as an important part of their professional identity.

*"[...] we are like a bridge between the school and the family."*¹

*"If we truly want to help the family and the child, I myself must believe that I can do it. I also need to be active in order to encourage the parents."*¹⁰

An important subcategory concerned the need to **improve diagnostic competencies related to the pupil's family environment**. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the need for further professional development, methodological support and practice-oriented training in the area of working with families. They were aware of the limitations of their own preparation and

emphasized the need for the systematic development of their competencies.

*"More practical training would help, for example, within lifelong learning programs focused on conversations with parents and managing difficult situations."*¹⁵

The findings suggest that school special educators are interested in further professional development and recognize the need for continuous improvement of their competencies. This aspect reflects their commitment to the quality of their work and their responsible approach to their profession.

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to identify the key factors that determine the level of self-assessment among school special educators in the field of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. Through qualitative research employing focus group interviews with 15 school special educators, several factors were identified and subsequently classified into three main categories.

The findings revealed that the level of professional self-confidence (self-efficacy) among school special educators is influenced by limitations in their professional preparation, particularly in the area of communication with family members. Similarly, Hansuvadha (2009) identified self-efficacy among beginning school special educators, who primarily reported insufficient preparation for cooperation with parents. A lack of self-confidence and less developed communication skills complicate effective cooperation with families. Given the nature of a school special educator's work, professionals are expected to communicate sensitively about complex situations and often emotionally demanding issues, including various diagnostic findings.

Corresponding factors were also identified in the next area, where school special educators emphasized experiencing uncertainty, anxiety, and fears of failure when confronting parents. Limited parental involvement negatively affects educators' perceptions of their own professional confidence. At the same time, active parental involvement in a child's educational process represents a key prerequisite for effective development and successful learning (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014).

The analysis also identified another important domain, namely social factors influencing the self-efficacy of school special educators in their work with families. Effective cooperation between schools and families is significantly influenced by the fact that there is no universal approach to family backgrounds in educational practice. Instead, educators encounter diverse types of parents (Kong & Lu, 2024). This diversity reflects differences in their pedagogical engagement, communication competencies and attitudes toward educational institutions, requiring school special educators to apply communication and intervention strategies flexibly according to the characteristics of individual families.

This diversity of family backgrounds may also be understood in the context of broader social changes affecting contemporary families. Líšková (2014) points out that modern families are exposed to various social, economic, and cultural pressures, which contribute to increasing diversity in family functioning, communication patterns, and parental involvement in children's education. These changes may create additional challenges for school special educators and further emphasize the importance of understanding the wider family context when conducting pedagogical diagnostics.

The focus group findings also highlighted the role of the school itself, particularly those factors within the school environment that influence the self-efficacy of school special educators. Similarly, Hansuvadha (2009) states that school administration and interpersonal relationships in the workplace are among the key factors influencing teachers' professional confidence. In the context of school leadership, respondents emphasized an urgent need for recognition, respect and trust from school management. The absence of such support may significantly hinder the effective implementation of inclusive educational practices.

Another empirically identified group of factors concerns the personal vision and professional ambitions of school special educators. High-quality diagnostic assessment of the family environment requires not only professional competencies but also specific personal characteristics, including engagement, a high level of empathy, well-developed communication skills for interacting with parents, and a commitment to continuous professional development.

Similarly, Herber and Hund (2026) emphasize the importance of personal characteristics and interpersonal skills in establishing positive relationships with parents. These skills primarily include positivity, mutual respect, openness in communication, the ability to see another person's perspective, honesty, transparency, and the active development of collaborative relationships.

A similar emphasis can be found in Sender (2020), who described communication with parents, cooperation with families, and the provision of individualized support as core dimensions of the school special educator's professional role. Such responsibilities require advanced interpersonal and communication skills and may contribute to the development of professional self-efficacy when working with pupils and their families.

The findings of the present study highlight the factors that determine school special educators' perceived self-efficacy in their work with families. Understanding these factors is important for improving professional preparation, educational practice and continuing professional development. Within the school environment, school special educators represent professionals for whom the assessment of a pupil's family environment constitutes an important source of information. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the development of diagnostic competencies and enhance self-efficacy in this area. This requires adequate professional preparation, appropriate personal characteristics, communication skills based on respect and empathy, and systematic support from schools.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study highlights that the perceived self-efficacy of school special educators in the field of pedagogical assessment of the family environment is determined by a complex set of factors operating at the levels of their pre-service and academic preparation, social aspects and personal professional vision. The findings clearly point to existing limitations in communication competencies and to the uncertainty experienced by school special educators when working with diverse types of parents. At the same time, the results indicate that personal characteristics such as empathy, engagement and continuous professional self-development, together with an open and respectful approach on the part of both schools and families, represent key foundations for effective cooperation. For educational practice, these findings suggest the need for more targeted development of the diagnostic and interpersonal competencies of future school special educators, as well as the strengthening of their professional confidence through recognition

and support within the workplace. Such measures may enable the diagnostics of family environments to become a more effective tool for supporting the cognitive, social and emotional development of pupils.

Resources

1. BANDURA, A. 1997. Self-efficacy. The Exercise of Control. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1997.
2. BRONFENBRENNER, U. 1979. The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Harvard university press.
3. DOROZHOVETS, O., HLADUSH, V. (2021). Diagnostic Competence of the Special Education Teacher in Slovakia. DOI: 10.51582/interconf.7-8.06.2021.007
4. GANDELOVÁ, T., SKOČÍKOVÁ, M. 2020. Školský špeciálny pedagóg – jedna z ciest k inkluzívnej škole: praktická príručka [online]. Bratislava: Výskumný ústav detskej psychológie a patopsychológie, 2020.
5. HANSUVADHA, N. 2009. Compromise in collaborating with families: Perspectives of beginning special education teachers. In Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 346–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901020903320270>
6. HERBER, M. E., HUND, A. M. 2026. The role of teacher efficacy and school climate in parent-teacher relationship quality and congruence for autistic students. In Psychology in the Schools, vol. 63, no. 2, pp. 357–374. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.70095>
7. KAZANOPOULOS, S. et al. (2022). The Self-Efficacy of Special and General Education Teachers in Implementing Inclusive Education in Greek Secondary Education. Education Sciences. 12 (6). DOI: 10.3390/educsci12060383
8. KONG, M., LU, Y. (2024). Learning Family: Concept, Measurement and the Effect on Individuals' Behaviors. Behavioral Scenes. 14 (11). doi: 10.3390/bs14111061
9. KRIZMAN, C. 2013. The Relationship Between Teachers' Self-efficacy Beliefs and Parental Involvement Practices: A Multi-method Study [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Texas Tech University
10. LÍŠKOVÁ, B. 2014. Citová a emocionální výchova v rodině a ve škole. Hradec Králové: Gaudeamus. ISBN 978-80-7435-398-7.
11. MARCINEKOVÁ, T., TELEKOVÁ, R. 2022. Diagnostické kompetencie učiteľa a rodinné prostredie začínajúcich školákov. [Diagnostic Competencies of Teachers and the Family Environment of Beginning Pupils]. In Edukácia, roč. 5, č. 1, s. 71–80. ISSN 1339-8725.
12. MIOVSKÝ, M. 2006. Kvalitativní přístup a metody v psychologickém výzkumu. 1. vyd. Praha: Grada Publishing, 332 s. ISBN 80-247-1362-4.
13. OPOZDA, D. (2019). SELECTED ASPECTS OF PEDAGOGICAL FAMILY DIAGNOSIS. ROCZNIKI PEDAGOGICZNE. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/rped.2019.11.4-4>
14. SAPUNGAN, M. G., SAPUNGAN, M.R. (2014). Parental Involvement in Child's Education: Importance, Barriers and Benefits. Asian Journal of Management Sciences & Education Vol. 3(2)
15. SAVOLAINEN, H. et al. (2012). Understanding teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in inclusive education: Implications for pre-service and in-service teacher education. Eur. J. Spec. Needs Educ. 27, 51–68. doi: 10.1080/08856257.2011.613603
16. SENDER, B. 2020. The Role of School Special Educator During Long Term Interruption of Present Education at Schools due to Corona-Crisis. In Proceedings of VIAC2020 – COVID-19. Czech Institute of Academic Education z.s., pp. 37–43. ISBN 978-80-88203-18-6.

17. STAŇOVÁ, Z., POLGÁRYOVÁ, E. 2023. Školský špeciálny pedagóg – zhodnotenie kompetencií: autoevalvačný nástroj pre školského špeciálneho pedagóga na zistenie úrovne kompetencií. Bratislava: VÚDPaP, 2023.
18. STRAUSS, A. L., CORBIN, J. M. (EDS.). 1997. Grounded theory in practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ISBN 978-0761907480.
19. TURZÁK, T. 2025. Self-efficacy of beginning teachers in the field of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. In The Slavonic Pedagogical Studies Journal, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 68–75. ISSN 1339-9055.
20. TURZÁK, T., TELEKOVÁ, R. 2025. Diagnostické kompetencie učiteľov vo vzťahu k žiakom a ich rodine. [Teachers' Diagnostic Competencies in Relation to Pupils and Their Families]. In Didaktika : odborný časopis pre výchovu a vzdelávanie, roč. 6, č. 3, s. 1–8. ISSN 1338-2845.
21. VAN STADEN-PAYNE, I., NEL, M. 2023. Exploring factors that full-service school teachers believe disable their self-efficacy to teach in an inclusive education system. In Frontiers in Education, vol. 7, p. 1009423. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1009423>
22. WRAY, E. et al. (2022). Factors influencing teacher self-efficacy for inclusive education: A systematic literature review. Teaching and Teacher Education. Vol. 117. 10.1016/j.tate.2022.103800