

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PROFESSION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract. The expert contribution brings knowledge not only about the special education profession itself, but also describes important competencies that are crucial for the performance of the special education profession in the Czech Republic. The mentioned profession is included in the system of helping professions, which have their specificity not only in the context of the demanding performance of the given profession. As part of the presentation of the legislation related to professional requirements, we also discuss the level of personal assumptions, which is based on the personal setting of each special education teacher. The special pedagogue is a key actor in the integratively inclusive process and, thanks to his competences, abilities and personality, he works to shape the next generations and social thinking.

Keywords: assumptions; Czech Republic; profession; special education teacher

Special education teacher as a profession mirroring the helping professions

The term helping profession refers to a group of professions that are based on the professionally qualified assistance of other people. Health, pedagogical, psychological and therapeutic occupations as well as occupations focused on social or psychological assistance are usually categorised among them.

The helping profession represent a system that has on one side those who help – the nurse, teacher, social worker or psychologist and on the other side those for whom the help is intended – the patient, pupil, client or user (Géringová 2011).

M. Vybíralová (2018) defines the helping professions as the general designation for professions concerned with helping others. The term includes the medical field, psychology, pedagogy and social work. In addition to employees working in these fields, nurses, people working in the social services, teachers, marriage and family counsellors, physiotherapists, etc. may be included among those active in the helping professions. Some activities performed by professionals are also done in certain instances by volunteers.

Assisting professions are much more of a service and a calling than a routine job. Therefore, it is very difficult to imagine this activity in the absence of an ethical context (Jankovský 2003).

It is clear from the definition above that the term helping professions essentially entails doing a specific job that, in accordance with specifics, focuses on the assistance or support of a given target group of people regardless of age, gender or other defining characteristics of a person.

K. Kopřiva (2016) regards the helping professions as those primarily aiming to help people. He lists doctors, nurses, educators, social workers, carers and psychologists as examples. At the same time, he contends that unlike the other professions, the relationship between the helping professional and his/her client is key in the helping professions because the patient needs to trust the doctor and feel the concern of the nurse; the pupil wants to respect his/her teacher, and the client would like to have confidence in the social worker (Kopřiva 2016).

The nature of special education as a helping profession is primarily determined by the professional concern of this educational-scientific field for individuals with disadvantages or disabilities where the humanist orientation is based on the need to help others, with an emphasis on respecting individual needs of a given person. The field of special education is relatively young. It was recognised as a field back at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. This field has then started in the mid-20th century to take the form of a field known to us today. Therefore, new questions are constantly being raised, and new findings crucial to better understanding and helping children and all people with disabilities or with special educational needs are coming to light.

Special education is a discipline focused on the education, training and complete personality development of disadvantaged people, aiming to achieve the greatest degree of social integration possible, including job and social opportunities, employment and relationships (Slowík 2016).

The concern of this field is focused above all on the person whose living situation is influenced by a disadvantage and who needs professional intervention and appropriate support in his/her social existence (Slowík 2016). A special education teacher works not only with a disabled person but also with his/her family because a functioning family environment is extraordinarily important for a person with a disability and is never completely replaceable (Slowík 2016).

The terms education and upbringing are often connected to children and teenagers. However the current special education attempts to intensively pay attention to adults of working age and in old age too. Special andragogy and gerontology are then mentioned in this context (Slowík 2016).

As evident from the text above, special education is itself characterised by a nature that places it among the helping professions. This fact is essentially linked to it being concerned with helping individuals with various disabilities, supporting their personality development and optimal socialisation under difficult conditions among other matters. Help or support in this context is not tied to the individual as such, but also to his/her surroundings or environment.

Similarly as at the everyday level for the helping professions, so for the level of special education or simply education, various requirements and certain expected prerequisites are demanded as part of the profession. So that a person is able to do his/her job as a special education teacher, a specific qualified level is expected of them, along with defined qualities, skills and abilities that the person should possess and are completely bound or connected to his/her personality.

Thinking about the teaching profession can be emphasized by several researches – Reinius et al. (2022) – “social sharing of expertise both among expert teacher network and with teacher colleagues was considered a central factor in enabling development and innovation work. The interviewees considered the sharing of practice-laden knowledge and competencies with fellow expert teachers as being critical and significant; this was enabled by mutual trust and support between the interviewees. This knowledge sharing helped them further develop and cultivate their innovation work and share their emerging know-how with colleagues. The interviewees felt that the mutual exchange of thoughts assisted their professional development, resulting in the cultivation of novel productive practices of digital and other pedagogies. The interviewees considered that their diverse backgrounds, here in terms of grade level, subjects taught, and school cultures, enriched their professional development.”

The authors T. Stewart and T. A. Jansky (2022) analyzed the data generated during the Oral Inquiry Process workshops to identify common challenges shared by the novice teachers who participated in this study and the nuances within them. Findings pointed to two common categories of struggle: reconciling theory and practice in standardized schools and managing relationships with veteran teachers. Nuances within these challenges included tension flowing from standardization, pacing constraints, and navigating complex relationships with veteran teachers. The authors argue that developing a nuanced understanding of the challenges novice teachers encounter is a vital first step in structuring teacher induction programs to respond to the needs of the teachers they serve.

They draw attention to the necessary challenge of professional development K. Evert and K. C. Stein (2022) – “Teacher professional learning is essential if teachers are to change their practice to align with the increased expectations of career-and-college ready standards. Networked professional learning communities (NLCs) provide a promising structure to increase teacher knowledge and foster collaboration across schools. This study suggests that while NLCs can be beneficial, PD providers and school leaders should find ways to promote collective participation in NLCs. However, our results show that collective participation can take many forms. Overall, collaboration and a form of collective participation provide an essential support for implementing NLC concepts in classrooms.”

It is also necessary to mention the professional crisis, as stated by the authors E. Towers, S. Gewirtz, M. Maguire and E. Neumann (2022) who did research among

educators in England “... many of the participants expressed concerns about the reforms and raised questions about themselves staying in teaching as well detailing pressures that they thought could lead others to leave the profession. The paper also explored a counter-narrative that highlighted teachers' satisfaction with teaching and their desire to remain in the profession. In this section we want to consider some of the implications of these findings, for, as we have argued earlier, there may be a danger if educational researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders reproduce and reinforce a ‘profession in crisis’ narrative without considering some alternative discourses.”

He draws attention not to a crisis, but to social pitfalls K. Oddone (2022) which deals with ongoing professional development (PD) enables school teachers to manage rapidly changing social and educational conditions, especially the isolating impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, research shows that commonly provided one-size-fits-all models of PD are often ineffective and leave teachers feeling frustrated. Formally structured approaches often overlook self-directed digitally mediated learning, and the innovative practices that some teachers already engage in.

Professional prerequisites

In terms of professional requirements, let us start with the legislation, especially Act No. 563/2004 Coll., the Act on Teaching Staff, (the Teaching Act), which defines who a teacher is – stating it is one who is engaged in direct teaching and direct educational, direct special educational or direct pedagogical-psychological activity by direct action on the educated person with whom he/she is engaged in educating and training. The direct teaching activity according to the legislation above is also done, apart from the special education teacher, by the teacher, after-school instructor, psychologist, educator in a facility for the further education of teaching professionals, free-time educator, assistant teacher, trainer, methodologist for prevention in pedagogical-psychological counselling and those in school management. The social prerequisites for all teachers are to be of sound mind and legal age. An additional, and no less important prerequisite is the professional qualification for the direct pedagogical activity that the teacher is responsible for. Furthermore, good moral character and good health is a requirement. In the Czech Republic, demonstrable fluency of Czech is required of teachers, unless stated otherwise.

In order for the special education teacher to be able to provide assistance and support for children or individuals with special education needs as effectively as possible, their professional education is required. As already mentioned, the Teaching Act also requires a professional qualification obtained at a university level of the teachers. A primary school first-grade or special needs teacher who performs direct pedagogical activities in the class or the school established for pupils with special educational needs acquires a professional qualification:

a) a university education gained by studying in an accredited master's course in the field of pedagogy focused on special education for teachers,

b) a university education gained by studying in an accredited master's course in the field of pedagogy focused on special education, in a course specialised in special education and education in a lifelong education programme offered by a university and focused on the preparation of teachers in the first stage of primary school, or

c) education intended for teachers of the first stage of primary school under paragraph 1 and university education obtained by studying in an accredited course in the field of pedagogical science intended for special education or education in a programme of lifelong education offered by a university and focused on special education¹.

The completion of university education for special education teachers does not end their study by a long shot. Even in this field, lifelong learning is necessary, if not essential.

Pedagogy – the psychological component of the profile of a special education teacher represents an amalgam of knowledge from general pedagogical and psychological disciplines that forms the basis for the ability to diagnose and correctly observe each pupil and his/her educational environment, to know the educational aims and the content of education, analyse the course of the educational process and to know how to organise it, select the right resources, methods and forms of education and know how to creatively apply them in practice. The special education teacher has a wide perspective over the whole field and the methodology of special education in the segment of specialised expertise (Trnková 2006).

At present, the field of study of special education is still more often sought out by newcomers interested in tertiary study. We can consider the fact whether, it is with regard to the inclusivity trend or awareness of the nature of human disabilities or limitations in their immediate area, or it is a field that offers the possibility of qualification for some form of help or support. Special education departments mostly have their place in the pedagogical faculties of Charles University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno, Palacký University in Olomouc, the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Hradec Králové University, Ostrava University, the University of Jan Evangelista Purkyně in Ústí nad Labem and also the Technical University in Liberec. The appeal of the field is evident in the special education course at private universities – e.g. the University of Jan Amos Komenský, Prague s.r.o. Smaller units are very often found in the departments of pedagogy or even outside pedagogical faculties.

Personal Prerequisites

Finding and defining all the abilities, skills and knowledge that are needed to do the job of a special education teacher is, even after the text on the nature of the

special education teacher given above, rather onerous. Authors such as Kucharská, Lazarová, Müller and Sekera have similarly examined key competencies or abilities for the special pedagogical profession. In the literature, we come across a large number of lists of competencies that are essential for the profession of the teacher, special education teacher or after-school instructor. In many ways, these views agree. The list of competencies of a special education teacher listed below shows the helping nature of this profession.

B. Lazarová (2005) lists the necessary professional competencies of a teacher. The competencies that she discusses are as follows:

- for teaching and education – we include here, psychopedagogical competencies, which are focused on designing procedures that stimulate student learning and on the implementation of these approaches and educational activities (ability to analyse, formulate and design the curriculum). Communicative competencies enable effective communication with pupils, parents and other educators or specialists (the skill to motivate, establish and maintain contact with pupils, and the skill to regulate, organise and manage). The following are diagnostic competencies, which are based on the teacher being able to diagnose knowledge, learning styles, potential problems and other possibilities, relations among pupils and the classroom environment. We can also include the ability to identify the personal qualities of the child into this group, his/her dynamic and changes in the education process;

- the personal competencies are another component that encourages the precise educational impact. Whether it concerns the skills of empathic, assertive or authentic behaviour, flexibility, the skill of acceptance of oneself and others, for example, the pupils, parents and colleagues;

- developing competencies – we place here the adaptive competency that is grounded in the teacher being able to navigate through social changes and to help the children with this. The skill to handle stress is included here too. Information competencies are important from the perspective of keeping up with the modern era. These are the skills to handle the literature, structure and make use of technology, even with the help of modern information technology. Research competencies and self-reflexive competencies should not be neglected from this group. They are important for a teacher so that he/she is able to consider his/her teaching activities and plan for changes in these activities. Last but not least, the autoregulative competencies allowing the perfection of pedagogical activities, teaching style and pedagogical skills are included here;

According to Sekera (2009), an additional list of personality traits are important for staff in the field of special education. It includes: flexibility – not sticking rigidly to the rules; maturity – controlling one's needs and recognising the needs of others well; integrity and honesty; sound judgement; reliance on healthy common sense; identification with values that comply with the programme and the aim of the institution or individual; responsibility – reasonably confident and responsibly

prudent – respecting the limits of a his/her bestowed authority – communicative, predictable and cooperative; stable – tolerant of frustration; openness and authenticity – accepting justifiable criticism; firmly supporting individuals/clients; maintaining clear borders between their problems and those of the clients; supporting the independence of the individual; setting a good example.

The range of personal prerequisites is very wide. According to A. Kucharská et al. (2013), it includes:

- communication abilities,
- problem-solving abilities,
- pedagogical tact,
- a sense of fairness,
- relation to children,
- ability to improvise,
- organisational abilities,
- presentable appearance and dress sense,
- skill to cooperate and negotiate,
- ability to flexibly react to changes.

The special education teacher must master the art of participatory listening and empathy, and not only when working with the family and children. They do not benefit the client if their empathy remains unexpressed, trapped in the mind of the teacher. The special education teacher must be able to see things as though they “were in the client’s shoes”, i.e. through the eyes of the client, find out how this world looks and how the client perceives it (Matoušek et al. 2003). A genuine special educator, an expert in possession of a higher level of empathy, can uncover meaning from the client’s deep feelings that the client himself is not aware of (the ability to listen and perceive non-verbal communication).

A study was done in 2016 on the positive character traits of special education teachers. ... The main aim of the questioning was to understand which selected positive quality the participants use the most in practice. Kindness, which the staff made use of most often for encouragement and positive feedback, came in first. Next came integrity, humour, honesty and affection. The following traits such as fairness, forgiveness, teamwork, humility, persistence and last of all enthusiasm came in next (Růžicková et al. 2018).

The list of competencies for the profession of special education teacher is therefore varied. Undoubtedly, the traditional abilities include the ability to intervene in individual ways for the benefit of a disadvantaged individual, to lead and motivate individuals in the educational process and beyond, to retrain and offset specific shortcomings, etc. However, the options for special educators are not exhausted in this way. At present, in the Czech Republic, when we consider global trends, there is a kind of interdisciplinary breakdown of borders and expansion of the range of potential competences of special educators, for example,

the possibility of using various therapeutic approaches enriching existing concepts (Müller et al. 2014).

The terms multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, together with other terms such as multiorganisational or interprofessional, are deemed to be very similar, if not identical, in meaning by J. Kaňák (2018). Whatever you call this collaboration, it is essential that all professionals participate in decision-making processes, communicate together and aim for the most comprehensive care of the individual. For users of services, support consisting primarily in the cooperation of experts plays an important role. They can combine their knowledge, skills and experience and provide just as comprehensive help as the user of the service needs and requires. The concept of multidisciplinary teamwork was created in the 1970s – 1980s by professionals who worked in services for people with mental disabilities and workers providing care for diabetic patients. The growing interest in this approach has led to the emergence of many definitions dealing with cooperation at the interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary levels (Madge and Khair 2000).

With regard to the diversity of the specialisation of a special education teacher, his/her work is still very diverse in connection with his/her professional specialisation or the selected target group of individuals/clients. These may specifically be:

- performance of the teaching profession in regular primary schools, special primary schools, primary schools for gifted children, practical schools, but rarely in lifelong learning programmes;
- in the methodical guidance of teachers at primary schools and the registration of pupils, the provision of counselling to families in the field of education and training;
- with regards to counselling, methodological and diagnostic activities as well as special pedagogical care, it appears in pedagogical-psychological counselling centres, special pedagogical centres, centres of educational care;
- additionally in social services – residential (e.g. homes for the elderly, homes for the disabled, homes with special regime), outpatient (e.g. day care centres, day hospitals, low-threshold facilities for children and youth) and field services (e.g. personal assistance, care service, support of independent living, early care), in social care institutions,
- educational activities, e.g. in children's homes, children's homes with a school, diagnostic institutes;
- non-governmental non-profit organisations focusing on a given target group of people in connection with special education or social work.

Last but not least, a special education teacher, especially in primary schools, helps his/her colleagues to cope with the educational and training difficulties of pupils.

As part of our own findings, we can present partial outputs from our own research (Stárek 2022b). The questionnaire survey was part of the exploratory project of the

School of Special Pedagogy “The exploratory analysis of a strategy to solve and realize pedagogical placement at the School of Special Pedagogy”. The aim of the analysis was to draw on the view of undergraduate students at the School of Special Pedagogy at the University Jan Amos Komensky Prague s.r.o. Thus, it is to highlight the students’ opinion on professional identity in the context of placement which is conducted during their studies.

The questionnaire was filled out by 501 students including 41 men (8%) and 459 females (92%). The age pyramid in figure 1 “Respondents” structure based on age and gender” presents respondents’ age layout. Only one-third of students at levels 1-3 are under 26 years. The other two-thirds are older, 6% is in age 42 years. Almost 5% is older than 50 years. The average students’ age is 33 years. Thus, the average and the median age of students at special pedagogy major is higher. The age median which separates students’ population equal in half is in the case of special pedagogy students for 6 years higher than within students of re-socializing and penitential pedagogy (34 vs. 24 years).

Another question which was in the questionnaire was a student’s evaluation of personal assumptions. Almost half of the students identified empathy as the most important personal quality (47%). As Figure 1 “Evaluation of student's personal assumptions at these majors” shows not any other personal quality was identified as often as empathy. The second most important was social awareness which was identified by 24% of respondents. The third was the ability to solve problematic situations and conflicts (24%). Nevertheless, responsibility, communication, consistency, and teamwork are important as well.

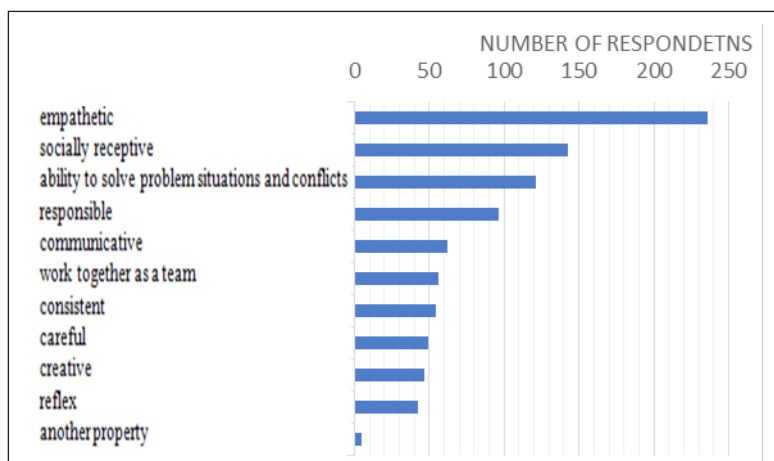


Figure 1. Evaluation of student’s personal assumptions at these majors
(own data processing)

Figure 2 shows “Employability in the field after successful graduation” significant part of students 85% are planning to work in their professional field after successful graduation. More than 13% of respondents are undecided and only 2% of respondents are not planning to work in the field.

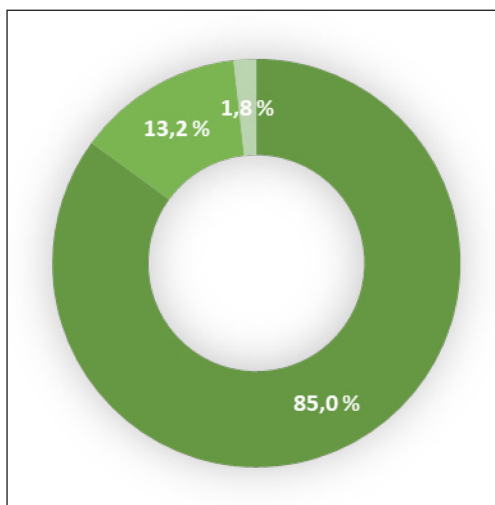


Figure 2. Employability in the field after successful graduation
(own data processing)

The students’ minimum explains that they are not planning to work in this field because they are increasing their education to be able to work at their current workplace. Plus, some of the respondents are working at primary schools and they want to gain more knowledge about and be able to apply it i.e., during inclusion at their schools. More than 73% of students are or plan to do their placement at their current workplace. Only 5,5% of students are working in an institution where they could their placement, but they prefer to do their placement in different provisions.

Partial research findings

Nowadays, placement is a more significant part of studies not only in employability but in the international perspective of improving educational quality mainly, by highlighting the need for practical training at diverse provisions. A placement helps with the creation and development of a professional identity. Therefore, the attention to professional identity was paid because single moments, experiences, abilities, feelings, reflections, and other aspects which students experience can help or harm one in their professional career and future employability. Thus, a placement is a place for applying theoretical knowledge and

realizing whether the student made the right choice to study their major. Also, it can be seen as motivation for those who are not studying types to finish their studies, so they will be able to do their profession. Development and quality of placement is not the only result of university but a student who is representing university also. A placement is a place where a student can open the door for other students to do the same placement. A permanently developing portfolio of cooperating institutions on diverse activities such as projects, conferences, and expert seminars generates knowledge of professions" multifarious. Plus, it generates acknowledgement about cooperation and the ability to share the information which assesses a student, a university, and their expertise.

Conclusion

Special educators are employed mainly in schools and schooling facilities intended for individuals with special educational needs. Recently, special educators have also found employment in mainstream schools. Furthermore, they can work in medical facilities and also in welfare. Their scope of work is therefore very diverse according where the profession is practised.

The special education teacher should learn as much as possible about the "inner world" of the given person and choose the most appropriate methods to help, support or motivate them. These methods will lead to harmonisation of personality, to knowing how to live with disabilities and to the greatest possible socialisation and education. It is therefore essential that the help of a special education teacher also stands on social and emotional pillars.

The result of the above text is the key finding that the essential specificity of this profession is the concept of a professional role, which is conditioned by external requirements, the social context, and the consensus between a specific special pedagogue and a specific school. An important aspect is the requirement of diplomatic behavior of the special pedagogue. The ability to apply appropriate communication strategies is influenced by many factors. These are, for example, the needs of the school, the personality characteristics of the individual, the influence of stress factors on the individual, coping with the stress load, the individual's experience with both stressful situations and professional experience. All this, and certainly many other conditioning factors, affect the application of communication skills and diplomatic negotiation with individuals, organizations or institutions. The successful application of these skills and a high level of communication skills influence the quality and constructiveness of cooperation and, in a wider context, can influence the educational process and social opinion. No less important is the essence of the commitment and effectiveness of the work of special educators.

According to L. Stárek (2022a) by respecting the differences of others, inclusive education can be seen as a useful form of education. Therefore, the

discrimination can be eliminated which will in turn enrich the quality of life of all pupils involved.

NOTE

1. ACT No. 563/2004, Coll. on Teaching Staff, Sec. 7 and 8b.
2. Law number 108/2006 collection., law about social services. In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
3. Law number 561/2004 collection, law about preschool, primary, high school, higher specified and other education (school act). In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
4. Law number 561/2004 collection., law about preschool, primary, high school, higher specified and other education (school act). In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
5. Law number 563/2004 collection, about teaching staff and about changing some laws. In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
6. Law number 82/2015 collection., Law, changing the law number 561/2004 collection, about preschool, primary, high school, higher specified and other education (school act). In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
7. Public notice number 27/2016 collection., Public notice about education of pupils with special education needs and talented pupils. In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky.
8. THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHT OF PERSON WITH DISABILITIES. [online]. [cit. 2021-04-10]. Available from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

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