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## **DIAGNOSTIC COMPETENCE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER IN SLOVAKIA**

**Abstract.** *The paper focuses on the analysis of the diagnostic competence of a special education teacher, which is a key element of the application of special pedagogical measures at the primary level of education. In primary school, a special education teacher carries out a special pedagogical intervention aimed at identifying specific manifestations in the process of educating pupils with the aim of their prevention and / or elimination. Intervention applies to students with special educational needs as well as intact students. Diagnostic competence is required to apply the correct precautions. Therefore, in our contribution we pay special attention to the specifics of the diagnostic competence of a special education teacher at the primary level of education in the Slovak Republic.*

**Key words:** *special education teacher; diagnostic competence; special pedagogical diagnostics.*

## **Introduction**

The perception of the process of education changed throughout the historical-anthropological development of society. Some forms of education have survived in the past, some have passed through time and are still relevant today. In any case, a teacher was always present in this process. Depending on the historical period, the profession of educator was perceived differently. Unfortunately, today we can observe a tendency towards a neglected relationship between society and teachers. The causes of a given phenomenon can have different origins.

The learning process is much more complex than society often understands. Without teacher's participation, education is often pointless and ineffective. The role of a teacher is not to elementally transfer knowledge to his students. His task is to shape their moral apparatus and lead them to independent and free thinking. The diagnostic competence of a teacher plays an important role in this process.

In the current context, there is rarely an opportunity where a teacher can demonstrate his / her diagnostic competence to the full extend. On the one hand, modern society places great demands on a teacher, on the other hand, the average teacher does not have physical opportunity to devote time to the implementation of pedagogical diagnostics of their students. The class can contain up to thirty students. Everyone needs special attention as they grow up in different conditions and gained different talents. The process of their special development requires an individual approach.

Currently the only way to get to sufficient individual approach is through inclusion. As shown by foreign as well as domestic experiences, the implementation of an inclusive education system benefits all students. To those who need help urgently and to those who have no problems at first glance. According to the facts, every student, as well as every person, certainly has a number of problems that can act as destabilizing factors for their development. Therefore, early intervention and assistance to students is an important

factor that will help them to develop and use their potential so that they do not become disappointed and offended by the whole world of adults. A system, a school, a teacher, a student cannot fail ... (Šilonová, Klein, 2019).

In Slovak schools, a school special pedagogue is increasingly participating in the educational process. Its presence contributes positively to the development of pupils with special educational needs as well as intact pupils. In our paper we will focus on the diagnostic competence of Special Education Teacher (further SET) in primary school. At the beginning we will discuss the basic concepts. We will gradually move to the formation of the diagnostic competence of the school special pedagogue, their legislative and personal frameworks.

## **1. Analysis of basic concepts**

The aim of this chapter is to define the basic postulates and demonstrate the key starting points in the field.

### **1.1 The concept of diagnostics and its types**

The term diagnostics comes from the field of medicine. According to the Medical Dictionary (Kábrt, Valach, 1979), diagnosis is the study of disease recognition. Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, (2009) in the pedagogical dictionary define diagnostics as an activity aimed at finding out the diagnosis, manifestations and symptoms of the disease. This results in the goal of diagnostics, which is aimed at identifying the causes of the disease, on the basis of which the diagnosis is made and a prognostic activity is carried out aimed at eliminating or curing the disease. According to Valenta (2003), the purpose of each diagnosis is to answer the questions: what? who? where? and how?

There are many types of diagnostics that relate to the learning environment. We know the following types of diagnostics:

- Medical;
- Social;
- Pedagogical;

- Psychological;
- Special pedagogical;
- Medical-pedagogical;
- Speech therapy (Šauerová et al. 2013).

In the context of our contribution, we will introduce pedagogical and special pedagogical diagnostics in more detail.

## **1.2 Pedagogical diagnostics**

In the analysis of the term pedagogical diagnostics, we come to the conclusion that there is no uniform definition of the term. Among domestic authors, Gavora (2001) characterizes the definition most aptly. According to him, pedagogical diagnostics is a certain procedure of activities that are carried out in an educational environment. The diagnostic activity begins with the aim of characterizing a student and the peculiarities of his speech and ends up with the final finding (diagnosis). At the same time, pedagogical diagnostics can be carried out both at home and at educational facilities. The gradation of pedagogical diagnostics starts from the student himself to the diagnostics of the class and the whole school. The pedagogical diagnosis also applies to the pupil's parents.

Pedagogical diagnostics is perceived as a pedagogical discipline. This discipline deals with the pedagogical-diagnostic process within the educational activity. As in any separate scientific discipline, new goals, methods, techniques and procedures of pedagogical diagnostics are developed. An important component of the discipline is the analysis of methodological problems of pedagogical diagnostics. According to Singul (1979), pedagogical diagnostics as a discipline also deals with the history of the origin of pedagogical diagnostics, its development and position within the system of pedagogical disciplines. Mojžíšek (1987) states that pedagogical diagnostics is a theory that is justified by the practice of identifying, analyzing, classifying and characterizing the object of education. Diagnosis is essential in evaluating the effectiveness of educational process. In

modern pedagogy, instead of the term pedagogical diagnostics, the term integral pedagogy is used more often (Kalhous, Obst, 2002).

### **1.3 Special pedagogical diagnostics**

Special pedagogical diagnostics deals with finding out knowledge about a disturbed or endangered individual. We understand it as a system of knowledge aimed at identifying the individual peculiarities of the affected individual and revealing the causes of these peculiarities (Vašek, 2006, p. 8). Special pedagogical diagnostics is needed to evaluate the level of disability, disruption or threat to students. It is necessary for early special-pedagogical intervention, the aim of which is to eliminate threatening manifestations. Nowadays, special pedagogical diagnostics is an integral part of the creation of an individual educational plan for a pupil with special educational needs. An important element of diagnosis is to determine the impact of disability or disruption on the educational activity of the student (Kastelová, 2014).

Tichá (2008) states that the essence of special pedagogical diagnostics is the determination of specific traits of an individual with disruption, threat or even talent. It is important to perceive the impact of disability on an individual's life in family and social environment. Based on the obtained data, a special pedagogue creates an overall picture of the individual and characterizes the strengths and weaknesses. The activity is necessary to ensure the important reeducation, rehabilitation and therapeutic activities.

The field of special pedagogical diagnostics is relatively extensive. Rádlová divides special pedagogical diagnostics according to the following criterias:

- Psychopedic;
- Somatopedic;
- Speech therapy;
- Surdopedic;
- Ophthalmopedic;
- Etopedic.

Currently, special pedagogical diagnostics is carried out by a special pedagogue, field special education teacher and special education teacher. In the following sections, we will discuss in more details the activities and diagnostic competence of SET.

## **2. Competence**

The term competence is defined by several authors. In general, we define the term competence as: "a general competence based on the knowledge, experience, values, dispositions that an individual has developed during his or her participation in education" (EURYDICE 2005). Competences can also be understood as the ability to perform a certain activity, which is determined by profession. (Vládová, Tekelová 2012).

Within the pedagogical practice of the teacher's competence we can understand it in several meanings. In the first sense, competencies are the powers in which a teacher can act. It defines the framework within which a teacher can perform a certain activity, including pedagogical or special pedagogical diagnostics. The second meaning represents the level of competence of a teacher or what he can apply in practice on the basis of personal dispositions or acquired education (Kompolt, 2000, pp. 41-53).

In the context of pedagogical science, we perceive the concept of competence as an ability, prerequisite or ability to successfully implement activities and solve problems in pedagogical situations. The teacher realizes his potential, pedagogical and professional skills within the teacher's competencies. According to the pedagogical dictionary (Průcha, Walterová, Mareš, 2009), teacher's competencies represent a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values that are necessary for the practice of the teaching profession.

## **3. The structure of diagnostic competence of a Special Education Teacher**

Based on the previous definitions, we perceive the diagnostic competence of SET in two dimensions. The first one as a power or remedy to perform a certain type of diagnostic activity, the second one as the very competence of a teaching or professional staff member. Next, we will try to analyze and describe the key elements of each dimension of the diagnostic competence of Special Education Teacher.

### **3.1 Legislative dimension of diagnostic competence**

A key element of the first dimension is the framework of competence. Its boundaries are determined in the vertical plane. They start at the level of the educational system and the state educational program and end at the educational program and goals of the school itself. The given element determines the goals of the educational activity of a pedagogical or professional employee, and also limits the possibility of implementing autonomous solutions in the educational process, including the implementation of pedagogical diagnostics. The given dimension is determined by the administrative and bureaucratic element.

According to Act no. 138/2019 Coll. *The Act on Pedagogical Employees and Professional Employees and on Amendments to Certain Acts*, SET does not perform direct special pedagogical diagnostics. This type of diagnostics is performed by specialists in the positions of special pedagogue and field special pedagogue. However, according to § 21 paragraph (a - d) SET performs special-pedagogical interventions of pupils with special educational needs (hereinafter SEP) and intact pupils. It is subsequently stated that it also provides special pedagogical counseling to children, pupils, legal representatives, pedagogical staff and professional staff. It takes an active part in cooperating with school facilities of educational counseling and prevention. So does this all mean that SET does not need diagnostic competence, as it does not perform direct special-pedagogical diagnostics? The answer will be definitely „no“.

As stated in the mentioned above law, SET implements a special pedagogical intervention. Intervention is a set of special pedagogical activities necessary for the benefit of a student. For example, when meeting a student, SET perceives how the student performs the task and observes the processes that he interprets afterwards. After interpretation, he will definitely draw conclusions that he can then consult with the class teacher, family representatives or counseling services. Without the intervention of

diagnostic competence, the activity is not possible. It follows that SET implements its diagnostic competence directly in a normal environment of the student.

The above-mentioned law states that SET belongs to the category of pedagogical employee. This means that he should work directly at the school during normal educational activities. With such an approach, it is possible to make a number of microdiagnoses and see the student in his natural school environment in interaction with peers, while observing the difficulties the student encounters during education. In comparison, a special pedagogue or a field special pedagogue takes part in direct special-pedagogical diagnostics, he carries out diagnostics only partially of pedagogical phenomena. Additionally, not every school can afford a special or field special pedagogue, when the SET has belonged to the category of a pedagogical employee since the ratification of the law.

The presence of SET and its positive impact on pupils' results and on the overall inclusive level of the school was demonstrated by the PRINED and PRIM projects, on the basis of which we are currently observing active changes in the field of inclusive education in Slovakia. These national projects became the basis for the implementation of others. The main ones are NP POP I and POP II.

Other legislative applications of the diagnostic competence of a school special pedagogue include the *Decree of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports of the Slovak Republic of 23 December 2019 no. 1/2020 Coll. on the qualification requirements for pedagogical staff and professional staff*. The given decree determines the basic required competencies of the SET and their level of education required for the implementation of its activities within the educational institution. The career levels of a school special pedagogue are described, as well as the required competencies, which are determined by professional standards.

### **3.2 The dimension of personal and professional competences**



An important component of pedagogical and special pedagogical competencies are the personal abilities of the educator. Švec (1999, pp. 34-36) in the model of pedagogical competencies also mentions the diagnostic competence of the teacher. He understands it as the ability to analyze the educational environment of the school, class and the performance of the student. When diagnosing a student through diagnostic competence, the teacher should reveal the student's personal learning style, be able to identify elements of the student's behavior and interpret them correctly. Knauer (1994, p. 14) writes that diagnostic competence is part of pedagogical competence. Following the given logic, the diagnostic competence of SET is a part of its special pedagogical competence.

When perceiving the diagnostic competence of SET, we come to a natural question, *what determines the ability of pedagogical competence?* For us, the answer is the personal and professional competencies of the individual. At first glance, it may seem that personal and professional competencies have different origins, forms and places of implementation. This is partly the case. The teacher and especially the SEN, as he works with students with SEN, must know well the limits of the realization of their abilities. On the other hand, personal assumptions are one of the most important determinants of the choice of the teaching profession and further professional self-development (Kasáčová, 2002). Subsequently, we will analyze the main components of personal and professional competencies.

According to Kasáčová (2010), **personal competencies** include:

- *mental resilience,*
- *physical fitness,*
- *personal attitudes,*
- *value orientations,*
- *personality skills,*
- *personality traits,*
- *social and emotional skills.*

The structure of **professional competences** of the Special Education Teacher, as we mentioned, is partly determined by the personal preconditions of the individual and the motivation to work. In relation to Special Education teacher, it is essential that the individual is also the bearer of a pro-inclusive philosophy (Lechta, 2016). To a large extent, professional competencies are also determined by the education achieved. The requirements for the achieved education are determined by Act no. 138/2019 Coll. *Act on Pedagogical Employees and Professional Employees and on Amendments to Certain Acts*. In the Decree of the *Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic of 23 December 2019 no. 1/2020 Coll. on the qualification preconditions of pedagogical employees and professional employees*, the study departments that an individual must complete in order to be entitled to perform the activities of the SET are also specified.

We include two categories among the professional competences of the Special Education Teacher. The first category - general pedagogical competences for 21st century teachers, created by the European Commission. These include: **knowledge and understanding** - knowledge of pedagogy, modern pedagogy, inclusion and other aspects of the pedagogical process; **skills** - planning, organizational, analytical, reflective and other skills necessary to ensure a high quality educational process; **disposition** - epistemological awareness, motivation for pedagogical activities and the so-called soft-skills.

The second category - special pedagogical competencies necessary for working with students with SEN. Competences in the given area result from the following categories of activities:

- Administrative work with professional documentation.
- Direct professional special pedagogical activity.
- Preventive and screening activities (Šilonová, Klein, Šinková 2019).
- Methodological and professional activity.

## Conclusion

For the effective development of students in the current conditions, the participation of a school special pedagogue is necessary. As shown by foreign and domestic researches, the activities of a school special pedagogue benefit all participants in the educational process. Therefore, it is necessary to examine all aspects of the profession from the point of view of pediatrics. It is necessary to understand the importance of the employee and identify the key elements of the profession, which can improve the activities of pedagogical and professional staff in mainstream schools in the future.

In this work, we focused on the analysis of the diagnostic competence of Special Education Teacher. We analyzed the current legislative data related to the profession, which determine the diagnostic competence of the school special pedagogue. They tried to describe the factors shaping, influencing and limiting the application of the diagnostic competence of a school special pedagogue in as much details as possible. We must note that there is a lot of room for further research in the field of position's profession.

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