

SELF-EFFICACY OF BEGINNING TEACHERS IN THE FIELD OF PEDAGOGICAL DIAGNOSTICS OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The author of the study addresses the issue of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. The qualitative research aimed to identify key factors that determine the level of assessment of beginning teachers' self-efficacy in the field of pedagogical diagnostics of the family. The research sample consisted of 17 Slovak beginning teachers (novices, with a maximum of five years of pedagogical experience), with whom two focus groups were conducted. The obtained results pointed to the main determinants of teachers' self-assessment (self-confidence) in the given area. The decisive factor turned out to be mainly the amount of practical experience with parents. The research confirmed that the extent of this experience significantly influences the perception of one's own competence. Moreover, we found that teachers who had the opportunity to work more closely with a motivated induction teacher evaluate their diagnostic competences in relation to the pupil's family environment somewhat more positively. Beginning teachers are also able to identify key areas in which their diagnostic competencies related to the pupil's family environment need to be further developed. The research results therefore confirm the need for further education and broadening of practical experience in this area of educational activity, especially for beginning teachers.

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Key words

beginning teachers, teacher competencies, pedagogical diagnostics of the family, self-efficacy, self-assessment

Introduction

The Slovak Republic ranks among the countries where pupils' academic achievement is strongly determined by their family background. This has been evidenced both by several international PISA assessments and by numerous domestic research studies. A high-quality school should, therefore, be one that, among other functions, also compensates for the so-called "social address" of the pupil. In this context, the work of teachers and school educators is highly demanding. Increased expectations are placed on teachers as professionals, requiring them to communicate effectively with parents and to assess the family conditions and environment of the pupil.

Despite the undeniable importance of this area, teachers and school educators often perceive it as challenging in practice. They report a lack of experience necessary for conducting effectively the assessments of pupil's family environment.

This issue is highlighted in both domestic and international research. For example, Smith and Sheridan (2019) analyzed as many as 39 studies and found that teachers frequently lack the skills and knowledge required for an effective collaboration and pedagogical assessment of the family environment. The study emphasizes the need for systematic teacher education in this area. Furthermore, Telekova and Marcinekova (2022) report that nearly half of the primary education teachers in their research sample considered the insufficient level of diagnostic competencies to be a significant barrier to assess pedagogically the family environment. Additionally, one-third of teachers were unable to confirm unequivocally their preparedness for communication with pupils' parents.

The issue of teacher preparedness for working with families has been examined through the concept of “self-efficacy” (perceived self-efficacy, personal perceived competence, as defined by Bandura’s socio-cognitive theory, 1997). In Slovakia, this concept was applied by Majercikova and Gavora (2013), who focused on examining teachers’ self-efficacy in the field of parent–teacher collaboration.

Teachers’ self-efficacy regarding work with the pupil’s family environment has also been examined only rarely in international contexts. Moreover, studies generally address the relationship between teachers’ self-efficacy and parent collaboration in general terms.

The authors Hoover-Dempsey, et al. (1987) used the “Teacher Opinion Questionnaire” to explore the link between teacher efficacy beliefs and parent involvement practices. The authors found that effective parental engagement in schools is most strongly determined by teachers’ perceived self-efficacy in relation to parents.

The study by Garcia (2004) also examines the relationship between teachers’ perceived self-efficacy and specific practices of family engagement. The research sample consisted of 110 elementary school teachers. Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy provided the theoretical framework for the examination of teacher efficacy. Self-efficacy was measured with the Teacher Efficacy Scale and the Family Involvement Teacher Efficacy Scale. The author emphasizes the need for more effective teacher preparation in this area. It is suggested that teachers should be provided with a greater number of practical experience that strengthens their self-efficacy beliefs in working with families.

Recent studies include the work of Bachman and Beard (2025), who developed and validated a new research instrument. Their study explored the nature of teachers’ family engagement efficacy beliefs and introduced a measurement tool, the Family Engagement Efficacy Beliefs of Educators (FEEB-E) survey. An analysis of data collected from 318 family-facing professionals demonstrated that the FEEB-E items represent family engagement efficacy beliefs adequately and reliably, providing a valid reflection of teachers’ beliefs. In designing the instrument, the authors drew on the document Family Engagement Core Competencies, published in 2022 by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement. They verified that educators’ family engagement efficacy beliefs positively correlate with general teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs. Within the teaching profession, this issue must therefore be regarded as highly significant. Nevertheless, in the Slovak context, it remains underexplored. A quantitative research approach alone does not sufficiently capture teachers’ barriers and concerns in the given area. For this reason, we first decided to investigate the phenomenon using a qualitative approach.

Methods

The research aim of the presented qualitative study was to identify factors determining the level of beginning teachers’ self-assessment of professional competence concerning the pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment.

Participants:

The sample consisted of 17 Slovak beginning teachers (novices, with a maximum of 5 years of teaching experience). The sampling was non-random. Two focus group interviews with 17 beginning teachers were conducted until the condition of theoretical saturation of data was met (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The author of this paper was a moderator of focus groups.

Methods of data collection:

Concerning the nature of the research problem and the aim to explore the unique experience of beginning teachers, the method of qualitative focus group was

employed. Qualitative data is authentic, complex, and rich, and provides an insight into the given field of interest. A set of open-ended questions was defined according to the previous research in this area. Group interactions that arose during the moderated interview brought dynamics into the process of phenomenon exploring – anything that had been said could be confirmed, supported, or disproved in a group discussion. The data from the focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Methods of data analysis:

The data were analyzed by means of grounded theory as proposed by Strauss & Corbin (1997). Two independent coders analyzed the data to detect as many aspects of the studied topic as possible, as well as to enable the validity check. Their partial results were compared to reach a congruent view on the phenomenon. They used multi-level coding of participants’ statements. In the next phase, central categories and sub-categories were created, relationships among them were explored, and the findings were included in a model (Miovsky, 2006).

Results

The analysis of focus group data revealed three categories that explain how Slovak beginning teachers (novices with a maximum of five years of teaching experience) perceive themselves and their role as professionals responsible for assessing pupils’ family environment. These categories include the theory and practice of the pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment, cooperation with experienced teachers, and personal vision and professional ambitions of teachers. The overview of key categories and subcategories is given in the following model (Fig.1). The relationships between the categories and their definitions are presented below in brief.

<p>3. 1 Theory and Practice of the Pedagogical Diagnostics of the Family Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the ability to apply theoretical knowledge, - solving model situations and exercises during university studies, - the opportunity to become acquainted with the pupil’s family during teaching practice
<p>2 Cooperation with Experienced Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the proactive approach of the induction teacher (trust and engagement)
<p>3.3. Personal Vision and Teachers’ Professional Ambitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attitude and activity - improvement of diagnostic competencies related to the pupil’s family environment

Figure 1: Main categories and subcategories

Theory and Practice of the Pedagogical Diagnostics of the Family Environment

The self-perception of beginning teachers as “professionals assessing the pupil’s family environment” is primarily shaped by the quality of university education. A key factor that positively influences their perception of this competence, as identified by novice teachers themselves, is the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Beginning teachers state that less attention should be devoted to theory and more to its practical application, particularly in applied pedagogical disciplines and didactics. Beginning teachers who received theoretical training in this area during their university studies—combined with practical exercises or model situations—

tended to perceive their own competence as somewhat higher compared to those who did not have the opportunity to apply their knowledge in practice. They also reported that solving model situations helped them better understand how to effectively use specific methods of the family assessment process.¹

*"The school prepared us at least partially; we also submitted an assignment on this topic and worked through model situations. That was probably what interested me the most."*⁵

*"Based on evaluation criteria, we learned how to analyze children's drawings of their family environment. I believe I could use that in practice as a supplementary diagnostic method for assessing the family."*¹⁵

Beginning teachers who spent more time in practical training during their university studies, particularly in after-school care settings, tend to perceive a higher level of their own competence. The less formal environment and daily contact with parents during pupil handover provide an opportunity to better understand the parent community.

*"I have experience working as an educator in an after-school care setting. There, I had the opportunity to observe parents and talk with them."*⁷

*"My role in after-school care has significantly contributed to my preparedness, especially in terms of working with children and interacting with their families."*⁹

Several beginning teachers reported that, during their teaching practice, they had the opportunity to meet with pupils' parents and, in collaboration with an experienced teacher, gained an insight into specific family-related issues. At the same time, they were more capable of identifying the fundamental barriers to the effective assessment of the pupil's family environment.

*"Any practical experience with parents during teacher training is highly beneficial. In my case, it was my mentor teacher during teaching practice – who later also became my induction teacher – who significantly helped me overcome my fears about communicating with parents."*¹²

Cooperation with Experienced Teachers

Beginning teachers consider the proactive approach of the induction teacher to be another key condition for positively perceiving their self-efficacy in the pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment. The role of the induction teacher is to support the beginning teacher in establishing themselves in practice.

Respondents in the research indicated that at the beginning of their teaching careers, they required assistance in several areas related to assessing pupils' family environment.

*"At the beginning, it was my induction teacher who helped me the most. At our school, we have many pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The pupils are a direct reflection of their parents and their behavior."*¹⁶

*„Working with experienced teachers can make a significant difference, but it requires the induction teacher to actively engage and build trust."*¹⁵

¹ to ensure the anonymity of research participants, their identification data was replaced by a number; it is placed as a superscript at the end of each statement.

In this context, the induction teacher should support beginning teachers in addressing challenges related to both the content of family environment assessment and the assessment process itself.

*"On the one hand, I needed guidance to clarify what specific aspects of the pupil's family I should focus on. Although I was theoretically familiar with effective communication strategies for interacting with parents and aware of various methods for exploring the family context, it was the approach of an experienced colleague (teacher) that gave me the confidence to engage more deeply with the pupil's family background."*⁴

Personal Vision and Teachers' Professional Ambitions

This issue is closely related to teachers' personal vision and their professional aspirations. Novice teachers aiming to enhance pupils' academic performance emphasize the importance of developing a thorough understanding of pupils' family contexts. Within this framework, they also acknowledge their own professional limitations.

Beginning teachers identified the need to further develop the following diagnostic competencies related to assessing pupils' family environment:

In terms of content

- Gain insight into the environment in which the pupil lives, including conditions for learning at home;
- assess the level of parental support provided during the learning process;
- evaluate the quality of parental care, including hygiene and access to the Internet;
- understand parental behavior towards the pupil, emotional relationships within the family, and overall family atmosphere;
- diagnose the child's readiness for education, including language development and cognitive functioning;
- understand parental expectations of the school and their educational aspirations for the child;
- identify the underlying causes of the pupil's academic failure or inappropriate behavior in the context of the family environment;
- assess the material and economic conditions of the family;
- understand the reasons behind irregular school attendance.

In terms of practical application

- demonstrate organizational and practical skills, particularly the ability to apply various methods of pedagogical diagnostics in the context of family assessment;
- apply fundamental principles of communication-related practical skills, including conducting consultations and diagnostic interviews with parents;
- listen to parents with empathy and patience, communicate assertively, accept differing viewpoints, and interact with the parent community in an authentic and congruent manner.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the factors that shape the self-perception of beginning teachers as "professionals assessing the pupil's family environment." The self-perception of beginning teachers as "professionals assessing the pupil's family environment" is shaped by a variety of distinct factors. In the present study, we outlined the most significant categories and subcategories that emerged from the implementation of focus group interviews with beginning teachers. Within this context, the teachers evaluated their own perceived professional competence.

The data indicate several key findings. One of the most frequently mentioned issues is the dominance of theory over practice in pre-service teacher education. Beginning teachers who had the opportunity to apply their knowledge during their studies and, for example, to assess the pupil's family environment during teaching practice, feel more competent. Teacher training should provide more opportunities for interaction with the community and individual parents (e.g., meetings, consultations etc.).

Our findings are similar to those of Denessen et al. (2009), who report that, in general, novice teachers do not feel well prepared to communicate with parents at the beginning of their teaching career.

Similar findings were also reported in the study by Cabral, Mata, and Peixoto (2024). The study aimed to find out to what extent Portuguese pre-service teachers are prepared to engage with families. Based on an extensive analysis of teacher education programs, the authors found that many of them provide limited opportunities for developing future teachers' strategies and attitudes necessary for effective family engagement. They recommend incorporating more practical experience into teacher preparation to enhance competence in this area.

A significant finding of the study is the influence of an induction teacher on novice teachers' perceived self-efficacy in the field of pedagogical diagnostics of the family environment.

Teachers who had the chance to work more closely with a committed induction teacher also evaluate their diagnostic competencies in relation to the pupil's family environment. Our findings are also supported by several international studies. The author Holley (2021) conducted a qualitative case study aimed at examining beginning teachers' self-perception of professional efficacy and their retention in the teaching profession from the perspective of novice teachers. The author found that perceiving positively their self-efficacy (in relation to pupils' education as well as cooperation with families) and the decision to remain in the profession were closely associated with the support from induction teachers - experienced mentors.

An important finding is that beginning teachers exhibit a clear understanding of both the conceptual framework and the procedural aspects involved in assessing the pupil's family environment. Within this context, they are also able to identify the principal areas in which further development of their diagnostic competencies related to the pupil's family environment is required.

Other research studies also highlight that, in addition to the factors identified in our analysis, a supportive school environment further influences beginning teachers' self-perception (see Watt & Richardson, 2023). Factors like approachable administration, effective communication, and opportunities for professional development contribute to a teacher's sense of autonomy, competence, and motivation. Conversely, excessive pressure, negative feedback, and lack of support can undermine teachers' self-efficacy and career satisfaction. In the context of teachers' responsibilities related to understanding the pupil's family environment and fostering collaboration with parents, the support provided to novice teachers becomes even more essential.

Some limitations may threaten the validity of our results.

One of them is related to the sampling. We tried to follow the rule of theoretical saturation of the data. However, we believe that a different, more heterogeneous sample may yield different results. Since there is a lack of similar studies in our country, we suggest the attention of both qualitative and quantitative researchers should be dedicated to the exploration of this issue.

It should further be noted that the research sample primarily consisted of teachers working in schools attended by pupils from the mainstream population. The substantial diversity among parents, their varied aspirations, and the nature of their engagement in their child's education also exerts a considerable influence on the self-perception of beginning teachers in this area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has outlined the key factors shaping the self-perception of beginning teachers as “professionals assessing the pupil’s family environment.” The findings indicate that novice teachers can clearly recognize the need for further development of their diagnostic competencies in the given area. Teacher education programs should, therefore, be designed in such a way that prospective teachers may acquire practical experience in working with parents already during their university studies. Furthermore, induction teachers ought to be trained systematically to ensure that they can provide sufficient support to novices at the outset of their careers. Finally, it would be essential for schools to foster a supportive environment in which parents are acknowledged and engaged as natural cooperative partners of the school.

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