

## Teacher assistant from the perspective of adult education

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**Abstract:** *The authors present the current requirements for professional competences of teacher assistants in the educational, (psycho) didactic, social and communication, managerial, normative and professionally-cultivating areas, which place higher demands on teacher assistants' training at faculties of education, as well as in the system of lifelong learning. The article documents the findings from interviews with 59 Czech teacher assistants. The authors used the grounded theory approach to analyse the data. The findings reveal the key professional competences as perceived by teacher assistants.*

**Key words:** *professional competences; teacher assistants; qualification prerequisites; pre-service and in-service education; professional standards for teacher assistants*

### Introduction

Professional competences are crucial to define any profession. This also applies to the profession of a teacher assistant, which is a relatively young profession in many European countries. The teacher assistant in the Czech Republic belongs to teaching staff, his/her work is financed from the state budget and his/her employer is a school or an educational institution. Pursuant to *Act No. 561/2004 Coll. on pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary technical and other education*, as amended (Česko, 2004a), and *Decree No. 27/2016 Coll. on the education of students with special educational needs and gifted students* (Česko, 2016), the position of a teacher assistant is conceived as a support measure for education of students with special educational needs. The role of a teacher assistant is to assist in the organization of educational processes in classes or study groups in which, due to the presence of students with disabilities or health or social disadvantages (hereinafter collectively referred to as "students with special educational needs"), increased demands are placed on teachers' work.

In terms of qualification prerequisites, the composition of teacher assistants in Czech schools is very diverse. The *Act No. 563/2004 Coll. on teaching staff* allows the position of a teacher assistant to be held by a university-educated graduate in the field of education, as well as an employee, who is a graduate of a secondary school with an educational focus or who has extended his/her qualifications by completing a minimum educational training in an in-service course. In the Czech Republic, a person who has completed only primary school education and extends his/her qualifications in the course for teacher assistants (Česko, 2004b) can also work as a teacher assistant. According to data from the Czech School Inspectorate, secondary school graduates with a school-leaving certificate constitute the largest group of teacher assistants (ČSI, 2017).

With the development of inclusive education, the profession of a teacher assistant in the Czech Republic is on the rise. According to available statistics, the number of teacher assistants in regional education has doubled over the last three years. A total of 17,725 teacher assistants worked in the regional education system in 2017, of which 13,660 were employed in primary schools, 2,693 in nursery schools and 975 in secondary schools (The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2018). Thus, the highest numbers of assistants are in primary schools. Currently, there is one teacher assistant per five or six primary school teachers.

With the rising number of assistants in Czech schools, it is necessary to formulate *the normative form of professional competences* of these employees, the so-called professional standards, which would help determine the conditions for the assistants' eligibility to perform specific activities in the school and the associated content of their pre-service and in-service training. In the Czech Republic, at least two attempts have been made in the last 10 years to formulate professional standards for teacher assistants (IPPP, 2010; UPOL, 2015). Professional standards for teacher assistants, which are currently being prepared, are based on the *Action Plan for Inclusive Education in the Czech Republic for 2016–2018*. They aim to define key professional activities of a teacher assistant. Professional standards for teacher assistants, among other things, should reflect the methodological text from the ESF RAMPS project (Collaboration of a school special education teacher and teacher assistant in schools involved in the RAMPS-VIP-III Project), which is to be updated in the context of changes based on the Education Act. The standard for a teacher assistant that is being prepared should be a tool for achieving, maintaining, and improving the quality of the teacher assistant's profession, but it should also reflect the demands that are placed on this profession.

The main activities of the teacher assistant are currently defined by *Decree No. 27/2016 on the education of students with special educational needs and gifted students* as follows: "(a) assisting in educational and

pedagogical activities and assisting in communication with students, students' legal representatives and the community from which students come; (b) assisting students to adapt to the school environment; (c) assisting students during classes and preparing them for classes; students are guided to attain the highest possible degree of independence, (d) necessary assistance to students in self-care and movement during classes and events organized by the school" (Česko, 2016, §5).

Myths that misinterpret educational activities of teacher assistants are not beneficial to the teacher assistant's profession. One of them is the myth that their work does not require specific competences because they mostly act on the instructions of teachers and are only mechanically helping them. This relatively widespread myth downplays the importance of the need to set requirements for specific professional training of teacher assistants.

### **Research design**

As part of the research project "*Preconception, construction and reconstruction of the professional identity of a teacher assistant*" (GAČR 1707101S), a team of researchers from the Faculty of Education at Charles University (Czech Republic) and researchers from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at University of New South Wales Sydney (Australia) focused on the professional identity of teacher assistants as a factor significantly influencing both the execution of this profession and the professional preparation of a teacher assistant. The professional identity of the teacher assistant is perceived by the researchers as dynamic and constructed in social acts which take place throughout the educational process, but especially in the interaction of the teacher assistant with students, teachers and parents and in activities that have the nature of purposeful behaviour, as part of which the teacher assistant verifies new methodological and organizational procedures and refines the already proven procedures. The survey was based on a mixed research strategy involving both quantitative and qualitative procedures. This article uses data from semi-structured interviews and demographic questions. Interviews with 59 teacher assistants took place during 2017, in an environment of standard primary schools in five regions of the Czech Republic. Their average length was 25 minutes. Teacher assistants by their signature confirmed their consent to be involved in the research project and were informed about anonymity in data processing. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed – the obtained data was subsequently analysed using the grounded theory method (Strauss, Corbin, 1999). In the demographic questions, participants with higher education prevailed, there were only 3 assistants without the GCE, 37 teacher assistants had secondary education with the GCE, 2 were graduates of a tertiary technical school and 17 had university education. Participants had a very

diverse previous practice in the education sector. Fourteen assistants worked in the education sector for less than two years, 19 assistants had a teaching experience of between two and six years, 14 assistants were in the school environment for six to twelve years, and 12 assistants had more than twelve years of teaching experience. With an exception of the length of work experience (on average higher than in the total population of teacher assistants in the Czech Republic), the research sample in demographic characteristics corresponded to the usual demographic profile of teacher assistants presented by official statistics of educational institutions in the Czech Republic.

### **Key competences from the perspective of teacher assistants**

The findings described below are based on the data analysis using the grounded theory approach, specifically the open and axial coding. A total of 146 codes were created by open coding and further categorized, i.e. grouped into 24 categories according to their affiliation to the same phenomenon (Strauss, Corbin, 1999). Through axial coding, we created links between categories and subcategories and thereby identified, inter alia, areas of key competences in the profession of teacher assistants. According to the relevance for setting the content of the professional training of teacher assistants, we categorized the identified competences into 7 groups according to the Vašutová model (2004): (i) subject specific competences, (ii) (psycho) didactic competences, (iii) (special) pedagogic competences, (iv) diagnostic and interventional competences, (v) social and communication competences, (vi) managerial and normative competences, and (vii) professionally cultivating competences. In order to demonstrate the relevance of selected groups of competences, we select only fragments of statements from the selective protocol.

Within the scope of *subject specific competences*, the teacher assistant should be able to transform basic knowledge of scientific disciplines and ways of exploring the given fields into the way of thinking of students with special educational needs. Within 3 categories (personal aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, professional aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, the teacher assistant's direct work), the importance of subject specific competences was confirmed by the participants.

*"Hm, I help kids understand the subject matter and make knowledge available to them. [...] To ensure, that they understand it better." AP40*

*"I am tutoring now, I still have six hours of tutoring, so my support consists in tutoring Czech, as a Czech teacher, those difficult things, I am aware of." AP45*

*"Well, I have a student whose main problem is a disability, an eye defect. He has relatively strong glasses and an eye tumour on one eye, so I actually more or less devote my time to this student and teach him English, Czech and mathematics. As to mathematics, he's now in the sixth grade, so there's a lot of drawing and I have to help him with his drawing tasks to make them as precise as possible. He needs an explanation, how to place a ruler, how to place a protractor, you know? And as regards Czech and his language studies: My control over his language studies is more difficult, because I can only check, whether he has done his homework, whether he knows where we are with the curriculum, because I do not speak English." AP34*

As part of *(psycho) didactic competences*, the teacher assistant should be able to adapt the teacher's basic methodological repertoire in teaching to individual student needs, use student learning incentive and support tools in respect of the student's individual special developmental features and use information and communication technologies to support his/her learning. Statements of participants in 4 categories (benefits of the teacher assistant's work, personal aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, professional aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, the teacher assistant's direct work) imply that these competences are needed in their work.

*"Teacher assistants must be able to teach, must know how memory works, how remembering works, how it works when someone learns something and must be aware of the areas where problems can arise in order to be able to help the student, they must possess theoretical knowledge, for sure." AP45*

*"... and above all, they should be able to work with the character of that child. They should be well prepared for this and be able to react to both positive and negative statements of the child, in order to ensure his/her positive progress, rather than doing him/her any harm, if the child doesn't understand it." AP57*

*"As I have already said, I am trying to motivate her to work, when she is inattentive, we can even go outside the classroom for a walk for a while so that she calms down. Sometimes we do certain things separately, but only to a minimum extent, usually we seek to make her work in the classroom, but when she needs to finish some task or needs our explanation, we work here in the office. I have already enlarged some documents for her, for example, when they ought to take a test, in order to help her, not to be so tired, I enlarged some documents for her. I communicate with the student's mum, basically, it is also my job, to inform her somehow." AP21*

As part of (*special*) *pedagogical competences*, the teacher assistant should have a good grasp of the processes of students' learning and organization of the educational process at the school where he works. He/she should understand needs of students in education and support them with appropriate differentiated practices in schoolwork. Statements of the participants in 5 categories (the teacher assistant's cooperation with teachers, benefits of the teacher assistant's work, personal aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, professional aptitude for the teacher assistant's work, the teacher assistant's direct work) imply that these competences are extremely necessary for their work.

*"I had to examine the situation, find out clearly what a particular child due to his/her diagnosis is capable of and how far his/her capabilities go, in order to be sure, what will I require from him/her, whether it is attainable for him/her or not and at the same time I wanted to ensure that the child makes real progress and that I was consistent enough. Consequently, I had to find the required information and get acquainted with it."* AP48

*"Further explanation of tasks, for example pointing at where we are, orientation on the screen and in textbooks, preparation of auxiliary tables, rules or re-tutoring (especially in the case of socially disadvantaged families) plus lending of aids, training of families if they are interested (mainly Roma families, where the parents are sometimes still illiterate), so we teach them how to hold a pencil, we give them homework, and that is perhaps enough."* AP44

*"... I have to tell him, which book he should open, what he should write, that it's written on the blackboard, I also take all the notes, because sometimes he is too slow to note down everything, so I want him to have the notes from me. Or for mathematics, he is not so much interested in, I make visual aids for him. For example, when they discussed negative numbers, I prepared a number axis for him, that he has stuck on the desk to have it constantly in front of his eyes. And also paper models, which he immediately crumpled, but looked at them before. We have a large timetable stuck on the desk for him to know what subject is scheduled for a particular hour, and he knows it by heart now, but previously, throughout the year, he was unaware of it. I have to write down everything in the homework diary, because, when the teacher assigns a particular homework and even writes it on the blackboard, he does not notice it at all, so I write everything down, word by word, even what will be in the written exam or the date the written exam is scheduled for, or a topic that will be part of it or if there is any event for children, I have to write it down, too."* AP33

Within the framework of *diagnostic and interventional* competences, the teacher assistant should be able to actively promote the good position of the student he supports within the social relationship network in the class. He/she should be able to recognize socially challenging behaviour of the student, identify the symptoms of Specific Learning Difficulties and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), sensory, cognitive and other functional impairments, reflect the interests and needs of the student. Statements of the participants within 2 categories (professional aptitude for the teacher assistant's work and the teacher assistant's direct work) imply that these competences are needed in their work.

*"During your career as an assistant you meet many children, every child is different, for all of them you should find out at least some information on how to work with a child with this particular diagnosis, so you need to complement your knowledge."* AP05

As part of *social and communication competences*, the teacher assistant should be familiar with the means of socialization of students and be able to use them in practice, master the means of pedagogical communication in the classroom, apply effective ways of communication with students, teachers, other school staff and students' parents. Statements of the participants were confirmed within 2 categories (the teacher assistant's cooperation with teachers, benefits of the teacher assistant's work).

*"... My task is, among other things, to ensure that the class accepts the child as much as possible, so I try to get the child involved in games even during breaks and last but not least, I am the child's support, so that he/she knows that any time he/she has someone to rely on when there is any problem, if the teacher cannot help him/her, I am available. So, these are the main things I help with."* AP05

In terms of *managerial and normative competences*, the teacher assistant must have the necessary knowledge of standards relating to the performance of his/her profession, ability to reflect on his/her work, master the procedures of management of learning and other activities of students, contribute to effective cooperation with the teacher, master the basic administrative tasks associated with the performance of his/her profession. He/she must also possess the skills to organize his/her work within direct and indirect pedagogical activity at school. Statements of the survey participants within 3 categories (organizational conditions for the teacher assistant's work, methodological support for the teacher assistant's work, material and technical conditions for

the teacher assistant's work) imply that these competences are really needed for their work.

*"Rather, I had to complement my education in terms of how the concept of inclusion came into being, what a pedagogical support plan is, how it should be completed, how reports to the advisory bureau should be drawn up, and then legislation-related matters and formal aspects, I had to learn all this."* AP44

*"We are preparing various monthly and semi-annual reports, and when you write it sort of retrospectively, it makes you think about it, and you eventually see on the paper what has/has not changed."* AP14

*"Well, it depends on the circumstances, mostly, when these are normal classes in the lower secondary school, the teacher prepares it and I, for example, oversee that the child sticks it in his/her exercise book, underlines and adds it to the exercise book, but if these are precisely those re-educational, intervention lessons, I prepare everything myself."* AP44

In the context of *professionally-cultivating competences*, the teacher assistant should act as a representative of his/her profession, adhere to ethical principles of his/her work, cooperate properly with teachers and other assistants in the school, be able to reflect on the evaluation of his/her performance by various parties, and develop himself/herself professionally through continuous self-improvement. Statements of the participants confirmed these competence requirements within a single category (importance of the teacher assistant's profession for inclusion).

*"I think that the teacher assistant should have the ability to cooperate in a team, to approach his/her position as part of the whole structure, that is, the relationship – student – assistant – class teacher – parent, obviously, I consider the school management to be on the teacher's side, because at the moment when these forces are combined, it keeps the child relaxed, assured that the family, the teacher, and the assistant share the same view. And I think that at the moment these forces are combined there is a great chance that it would be most beneficial for the child."* (AP49)

## **Conclusion**

With the development of inclusive education in the Czech Republic, the number of teacher assistants is increasing. It is critical to create timeless national professional standards for teacher assistants which would be based on



the identification of key professional competences. The presented research findings, which are part of a larger study focused on the mechanisms of teacher assistants' professional identity development, reflect the key professional competences as perceived by teacher assistants. It is necessary to respect these perceptions not only in setting up the work of teacher assistants in school practice, but also to take them into account when preparing a normative framework for their work – professional standards for teacher assistants, which are still missing in the Czech Republic, even after 20 years. It is also necessary to consider the structure of the required teacher assistants' professional competences in both pre-service and in-service education.

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