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# Perspectives regarding the self-efficacy of social activation workers in the Czech system of caring for at-risk children

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with perspectives on the self-efficacy of social activation employees in the system of caring for at-risk children. This contribution concerns a specific group of assisting employees focused on social and educational effects in families, a subject of great interest of the field of social pedagogy. The study reveals the results of qualitative research over the months of September and October 2017 which applies the technique of deep interviews with social activation service employees. The obtained data was analysed by applying procedures anchored in theory. Emerging from the results of the research was the need for a deeper interest on three levels: personality-based, profession-based and stress-based concerns. These findings will aid in constructing a methodically sound and reliable research tool for the given profession.

**Keywords:** family support, field work, self-efficacy, grounded theory

## Vnímání profesní zdatnosti u terénních sociálně aktivizačních pracovníků s rodinou

**Abstrakt:** Příspěvek se zabývá pohledem terénních pracovníků s rodinami na profesní zdatnost /self-efficacy/ v systému péče o ohrožené děti. Jedná se o specifickou skupinu pomáhajících pracovníků zaměřujících se na sociálně - výchovné působení v rodinách, které je předmětem zájmu oboru sociální pedagogiky. Studie zahrnuje výsledky kvalitativního výzkumného šetření během měsíců září-říjen 2017 technikou hloubkových rozhovorů s devíti pracovníky sociálně aktivizačních služeb. Získaná data byla analyzována za využití postupů zakotvené teorie. Z výsledků výzkumu vyplynula potřeba hlubšího zájmu o profesní „self-efficacy“ ve společenském kontextu ve třech rovinách: osobnostní, profesní a zátěžové. Toto zjištění bude sloužit ke konstrukci metodologicky vhodného a reliabilního výzkumného nástroje pro příslušnou profesi.

**Klíčová slova:** podpora rodiny, terén, koncept self-efficacy, zakotvená teorie

## Introduction

The following study is focused on the self-efficacy of social workers operating in the current Czech care system for children at risk. This group of social workers has been created in response to the Czech government document Action plan on the implementation of the national strategy for the protection of children's rights 2012-2015, in which the government has committed to create a functioning system by 2018 to ensure the consistent protection of children's rights and the fulfilment of their needs (["Action plan," 2018](#)). In connection to this topic, we consider the partial goal of the national strategy – the development of alternatives regarding the care of children at risk in their home environment – as the most relevant point of our study. This goal includes support for family-type care and family support. The sample selection of the workers is justified by the importance of keeping up-to-date with all the issues involved.

The aim of this article is to outline the perspectives of social workers on self-efficacy in the field of the current care system for children at risk. Another goal is to determine the competencies that are essential for this profession along with the resources that can increase public interest in direct family-type care, especially regarding issues of self-efficacy in the field within the social context. Basic findings are also presented regarding benefits proceeding from increased self-efficacy, as these determine not only the use of cognitive strategies but also the importance of self-regulation within the self-awareness mechanisms ([Majerčíková et al., 2012](#)). It is clear that not enough attention has been devoted to these issues in the Czech Republic.

[Smetáčková, Topková, and Vozková \(2017\)](#), who focus on development and piloting in the field of self-efficacy in the Czech system of education, have begun to deal more specifically with the concept of self-efficacy within Czech pedeutology. In the socio-pedagogical field, [Hrbáčková and Petr Šafránková \(2015\)](#) have concentrated on this issue in practice in their research entitled Perceiving the effectiveness of pedagogical staff in the field of institutional care for children and young people, an article which focuses on staff at centres of educational care (SVP) and children's homes (DD). This study dealt with how self-efficacy influences children's behaviour, school success and the leisure time of children.<sup>1</sup>

In general, research in the Czech Republic in the area of professional self-efficacy remains less developed, which contrasts with the situation in Slovakia ([Azar, 2009](#); [Bleicher, 2004](#); [Gavora & Majerčíková, 2012](#); [Gavora, 2009, 2011](#); [Gibson & Dembo, 1984](#); [Perkins, 2007](#); [Šuverová & Ďurkovičová, 2012](#); [Tang, Au, Schwarzer, & Schmitz, 2001](#); [Tschannnen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, 2007](#); [Wiegerová & Ficová, 2012](#)). Based on this determination, the home environment opens up a space in the field of the helping professions to explore self-efficacy with respect to the social-educational components of family-type care in its natural environment.

## 1 The theoretical framework

This section will outline theoretical starting points which should clarify the intention focus of the research.

### 1.1 Social activation services for families with children

According to statistics from [Franklin, Gerlach, and Chanmugam \(2008\)](#), 12-22% of children over the course of school attendance experience personal or educational issues about which they would like to consult with a professional. Among children from socially disadvantaged families, this number increases up to 50%.

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<sup>1</sup> A FHS UTB master's thesis that presents methodologically interesting perspectives on these matters was completed by [Málek \(2017\)](#).

In the current Czech system of care for at-risk children, the employee works as an intermediary between the child, the family, the school and possibly local authorities and professional institutions. The work takes place directly in the field,<sup>2</sup> and thanks to close contact with children and parents, the social worker maintains good prospects for successful intervention.

In recent decades, the Czech Republic has seen the rather intensive development of social activation services for families with children, i.e., in increase in the number of employees conducting field work and helping families with educational as well as other areas. Outreach programs have been implemented mainly by non-profit organizations and certain municipalities. This form of home care provides support to families with children whose development is endangered as a result of the impact of a long-term crisis situation which the family cannot overcome without outside assistance ([Matoušek & Pazlarová, 2014](#)). One of the functions of these services involves certain pedagogical, educational and activation activities<sup>3</sup> within which one may observe in practice the clear interconnection of social work with the family as well as support for the education and upbringing of the children living in a particular family. An ancillary aim is to facilitate a certain preventative effect in families, an outcome which is a primary subject of interest of work in social pedagogy. Support for families in this direction involves access to a family who has indicated a desire to improve its situation in the interest of the child and adults alike, with this aspiration often proceeding only after initial failures to find an alternative solution for the child. It is necessary to strengthen as well as to clearly demonstrate sources of support to families and children for whom this source has not been made available. Here the role of the worker can be absolutely crucial. The purpose of this work is to improve the social status of people who deviate from social standards. As a part of the social activation programme for the family, alternatives arise that eliminate the need of placing a child into institutional care. Working with a family in a non-profit organization is based on the fact that the NGO provides social services to the family as a whole in order to strengthen and protect the safety of their members. The services that are provided are intense and focused on the specific goals and needs of individual family members.

In the mid-20th century, the term “multiple problem families” ([Matoušek & Pazlarová, 2014, p. 13](#)) was applied to one type of these target groups needing support. Other equivalents applied include “families in extreme distress” ([Sharlin & Shamai, 2000, p. 257](#)), “families in perpetual crisis” ([Kagan & Schlosberg, 1989, p. 208](#)) and “underorganized families” ([Aponte, 1976, p. 303](#)).

## 1.2 Concept of self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy was first introduced in 1977 by Bandura within sociocognitive theory, a set of models which seek to explain human activity, related cognitive and personality characteristics as well as the environment in which these features exist. These components interact with each other and are mutually intertwined in what has been termed reciprocal determinism ([Bandura, 1977](#)). A specific example would be when an individual performs some activity, after which he reflects and evaluates the consequences, this process affects his personality in a way that consolidates or changes it. Further, the environment in which the individual operates is also affected. As described, this system has wider overall implications in other intersecting environments. Bandura ([1994, 1997](#)) therefore emphasizes the interconnectedness between the various elements of the system, with the most powerful factor regulating the activity of man being his conviction of himself, of his own potentials and abilities. Self-efficacy is thus defined as “people's beliefs about their abilities needed to achieve certain performances” ([Bandura, 1994, p. 2](#)).

In our case, these beliefs will be examined in the form of attitudes of social workers toward their necessary proficiencies within their profession with regard to performing effective work with families. However, self-efficacy is not a congenital property; on the contrary, it develops over the course of

<sup>2</sup> i.e., working directly with at-risk families.

<sup>3</sup> Legislatively, these working activities are anchored in the CR in the framework of providing social activation services in Act No. 108/2006 Coll., Sec 65(2) as pedagogical, educational and activation activities.

one's life, i.e., as formed by practice. According to Bandura ([1994](#), [1997](#)), four main sources of self-efficacy are considered to be influential, with an experience of mastery regarding successful performance (especially when overcoming obstacles that require some effort) considered to represent a high level of self-efficacy. The second source is so-called vicarious experience. If an individual in his environment has contact with someone with similar characteristics as he possesses and who has achieved success through his abilities and efforts, the individual also has a feeling of conviction that he can handle similar tasks. In our case, vicarious experiences may come through training suited specifically to the profession, other specialized training, or from supervision of some sort that can improve the quality of work. Another source is so-called social persuasion or encouragement, i.e., essentially a kind of support of a significant person from his or her environment and an assurance from this figure that the individual is able to handle the activity. The last source is the manifestation of somatic and emotional states so called physiological arousals, i.e., states and feelings people rely on when evaluating their abilities. The feeling of self-efficacy may increase if the individual judges that he feels calm and unstressed while performing the task, so he has sufficient abilities to master it ([Bandura, 1994, 1997](#)). Employees assessing their own qualities can be an important self-regulatory element in field work with the family, i.e., the worker's assessment of their potentials can to a large extent influence their approach to overall family support, thereby contributing to the quality of the service provided. Regarding this issue, it is almost impossible not to refer to client-friendliness. Depending on the level of self-regulation, the worker activates his or her professional competences and, depending on these, acts accordingly. A positive assessment of one's own self-efficacy allows for the confident realization of specialised knowledge and skills, whereas a negative assessment of capabilities usually hinders their application ([Gavora, 2012](#)).

## 2 Methodology

In self-efficacy surveys, questionnaire methods are used more often than using qualitative approaches. For example in-depth interview, narration, and participatory observation ([Majerčíková et al., 2012](#)). Owing to the goal of our research project, we have decided to use a qualitative research strategy, which is very often preceded by a pre-research qualitative strategy ([Macek, 2012](#)).

### 2.1 Research objective

The goal of the research is to determine the view of socially activating workers with the family (SAS) in regard to the self-efficacy required in the care system for children at risk. The main research question was formulated as follows: How do SAS staff view their proficiency in the established care system for vulnerable children? (HVO). This query was subsequently extended by other specific research questions: what is the difference in work? (SVO1); what skills are important to perform high-quality fieldwork? (SVO2); what am I able to do in relation to the client? (SVO3); and what factors can affect fieldwork? (SVO4).

### 2.2 Research method

Due to the specificity of the profession, we have opted for a qualitative research strategy by using the technique of a deep semi-structured interview with an effort to understand the workers and to perceive each subject's unique qualities within the profession. The individual testimonies of the informants were conceived as communicating a realistic depiction of each subject's specific work and potential competences in the current system. The interview allows the capture of not only facts, but also to facility to delve deeper into the motives and attitudes of the informants. Each respondent's initial reactions allowed the interviewers to gauge how other questions should be directed ([Gavora, 2010](#)). One distinct advantage of the qualitative approach is the potential to closely monitor a very limited number of cases with regard to the research question and thus obtain a better understanding of what is happening in a certain part of social reality ([Macek, 2012](#)). Because the conversation is based

specifically on interpersonal contact, success was dependent on the establishment of a friendly relationship and the maintaining an open atmosphere with the subjects.

### 2.3 Research sample

The subjects of the survey consisted of social activation service employees who were interviewed in regard to their work with at-risk families with underage children in the natural home environment. The research was realized in the period of September – October 2017. The research sample consisted of nine informants working in the field of social activation services from different regions of the Czech Republic (Zlín, Olomouc, Praha, and Ústecko). The interview was conducted in the offices or other facilities of their particular organization. An intentional qualified selection of employees was selected from facilities providing these registered services, with the choices based on two selection characteristics: 1) the employee has worked in social activation services for at least one year, 2) the employee was willing to participate in the research and has consented to an audio recording of the interview. The participants were guaranteed anonymity, i.e., no specific names of persons or individual facilities appear in the study. Participation in the focus group was voluntary; the volunteers were informed in advance of the intention of the study, thus it is also possible to discuss their potential motivation for taking part in the survey.

## 3 Analysis and interpretation of the data

The subjects of the research were perceptions of SAS employees regarding the self-efficacy needed for high-quality and efficient field work. To process the outputs of the semi-structured in-depth interviews, an embedded theory was chosen for the data analysis process ([Corbin & Strauss, 1998](#)) to gain an overall view of the work of the system in the social context. Transcripts were made of the recorded interviews, which were then analysed using the three-step coding method, i.e., open, axial and selective codes ([Corbin & Strauss, 1998](#); [Švaříček & Šedřová, 2007](#)). The analysed text was then divided into meaningful units of varying size typically made up of words or phrases, with a code assigned to each unit. These codes consisted of appropriate technical terms along with in vivo codes, i.e., expressions used by the informants themselves. During coding, the codes have been merged, distributed, or replaced by more appropriate titles. During this analytical activity, we extracted 114 codes which were then placed into one of eight categories, among which we searched for mutual relationships and contexts (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Paradigmatic perceptions of SAS workers model regarding self-efficacy in the current system of care for vulnerable children*

Relations	Category
Causal condition	(1) Social prevention
Factors	(2) Self-efficacy (personality-based, profession-based, stress-based)
	(3) Activation
	(5) Educational activities
Context	(4) In the field
	(6) Factors influencing proficiencies, experience, patterns of influence, encouragement, conditions for workers
Intervening conditions	
Strategy of action, interaction	(7) Attitude toward clients
Resulting impact	(8) Quality of field work

The basic aim of the research was not only to describe singular phenomena, but to generate a theory that is embedded in partial data focused on social phenomena that form the professional interactions under study. The use of anchoring theory may initially appear contradictory in relation to the theoretical concept of Bandura; nevertheless, only one part of our perspective has been formed according to Professor Bandura's ideas, and we seek to add to the overall context of the issues involved.

### 3.1 Social prevention and educational activities

Identified as a causal condition within the paradigm model (see Table 1), the category of SOCIAL PREVENTION (1) was merged into a total of 6 codes: Timeliness and strategy of protection, Volunteering, Improving living standards, Depicting the problem, Providing insights, Impact on the generation of current children. The general category includes codes with statements by informants regarding their view of the current function of the service.

*In terms of prevention, one issue I see in these services is the fact that we do not even find families where these problems are; in the future for example, we need offer services whenever an underage or young mother is involved, beforehand before problems arise (I: 12-13).*

Numerous phenomena can be acted upon and responded to preemptively. [Fisher and Škoda \(2009\)](#) mentions, for example, problems of family poverty, indebtedness, and other associated long-term stressful situations resulting in psychological disorders of parents that subsequently affect the education of children. This can be illustrated by the following statements by the respondents:

*In the service as I envision it, I would introduce measures and work methods that precede the social sphere, i.e., whether the children are going to preschool or elementary school, or if the mother is in a long term situation of paying rent and staying in a flat with her children (II: 22-23).*

*We work with families, so the procedure is to prevent problems, especially in children, so that there is no transgenerational transmission of negative issues such as that the children are under-educated or are not properly looked after, so the children might grow up in better circumstances than their parents did. With the adults, if a problem is dealt with right at the beginning, deeper issues that could arise later can be avoided (III: 14-17).*

Based on this, the social workers' aim is to help people overcome unfavourable social situations and protect them from the occurrence and spread of undesirable phenomena, as indicated by [Nedělníková and Gojová \(2008\)](#). One respondent broadens the view of the preventive activity of the service:

*Doing everything to ensure that families are living a way of life so as not to deviate from the social norm, a standard which they often do not recognize or even see. They seem satisfied with their current existence, but if you give them at least a stimulus or put a different angle to the situation, it can lead them to think, so that they can finally overcome the 'bargaining' stage (IV: 29-32).*

### 3.2 Self-efficacy

The central category in our research is SELF-EFFICACY (2) in working with families as a precisely specified research goal. Well-practiced social prevention should be characterized by a demand driven by the professionalisation of the work of family support workers. Their competences and other assumptions are based on their own subjective perceptions based on experience influenced by practice. Because this is a profession in which the close links of knowledge from the humanities and social sciences merge, we have narrowed our focus on operations and educational activities in the profession. Within the central category, 3 basic subcategories of related competences form part of the worker's professional profile and ability to follow up on their own development: 1) Personality-based, 2) Profession-based, and 3) Stress-based. These individual subcategories were further analysed.

### 3.2.1 Personality-based proficiencies

In the personality-based subcategory, the following 4 most frequent codes were selected: Empathy, Active listening, Openness, and Authenticity. Personality traits come through by way of significant skills and abilities that excel through negotiation and expression in different situations. The attendant empathy expressed in a given profession can help the other person to find their own way. [Barret-Lennard \(2003\)](#), who have written extensively on empathy, indicate that the empathic perception of the other helps to improve one's own self-esteem. It is as if an inner door to the other person is opened, by which this person can see what lies behind it. An essential aspect in this way is listening in face-to face communication. Building on the knowledge of psychology, [Gjuričová and Kubička \(2009\)](#) point out the need for listening in the family. The strength of empathy and active listening in a given profession is exemplified in the following testimony:

*The most important component is actively listening, actively sensing what the client needs, how he is currently tuned. As to whether we want to work on something when I feel it is not internally set, it may be very difficult to motivate the person at the moment, so I move on to something else that he does want. I think that empathy is not only an abstract concept but it is our greatest benefit along with the spontaneity of the worker (II: 105-109).*

The need for knowing how listen empathetically to communicate and empathically can be seen in this statement: "Those who do not know how sense a situation and how to empathize and communicate accordingly simply cannot do the job" (VIII: 206). The following recorded statement refers to the value of listening, but not specifically to active listening.

*I definitely listen, I'm a big listener like a willow, and sometimes that's enough. Sometimes it's really enough – it's that only thing they need and they do not have to go any further. I just sit and listen for half an hour (VII: 196-197).*

There is a disparity in this testimony, and the important question arises as to whether mere indefatigable lengthy listening is in fact truly effective for the client. According to [Šiffelová \(2010\)](#), clients need more than just listening and an accepting presence; they need to know if they are being understood as they speak. Openness involves the willingness of the worker to accept the client's ideas, which may reflect unconventional values. This kind of mindset is a feature that also applies to cognitive intelligence ([Schultz & Roberts, 2007](#)).

Openness also predetermines a certain form of mutual relationship between the client and the worker: "I think openness is important in this work - the ability to be open, honest, quick to orientate oneself and respond to the client" (V: 179-180). "Such a healthy openness in relation to the client is always in place, shaping our patience" (VII: 158-159). With patience, the worker can be seen as progressing at the pace of the client. Openness can further predetermine a certain level of positivity in the worker's personal attitude, as well as his spontaneous reactions. "The worker should behave naturally to the client, then the work proceeds by itself unforced; they see when I'm not there, and maybe they take that personally ..." (IV: 158-159).

[Rogers \(1995\)](#) believes that natural interaction in this relationship is the most important element. The person who is capable of being open to himself as he is has the greatest effect. A clear example of the worker interacting authentically work comes: "If a satisfied worker is able to pass on this quality to himself and to his client ..." (VI: 221-222). Self-disclosure to a certain extent also relates to physical contact, which can provide the client with a sense of security, relief, care and support. "I also have some personal contact; perhaps I put my hand on the client's shoulder or pat on her back to let her know she is not alone at that moment" (VII: 257-258). Of course the client is the one who decides whether a certain type of physical contact is acceptable.

As a programmer uses a computer in his work, the field worker uses his personality, which can have a strong influence on the outcomes of his work. Nevertheless, it depends on the worker how much he uses his own disposition. "The resource I use the most in my work is my own personality" (II: 67-68).

### 3.2.2 Profession-based proficiencies

[Maceček \(2008\)](#) indicate how numerous activities can help to provide information and services to the target group in the field. Competencies are in this way quite varied. Our intention was, however, to combine competences that are related to social educational activities during activation and to compile them within the category of self-efficacy. Here for clarity we determined 6 codes to be inserted into the spreadsheet (see Table 2). In most areas, the testimonies of the informants coincided with and confirmed their hidden educational and educational activities.

*We teach clients to do things in the future for themselves or at least part of them. Activities that require practical training seem to manage themselves; when they get to know the process a bit better, they get right to it (V: 138-139).*

Table 2

*Areas of socially educational activity in activation with the family*

Areas of educational activation	Examples of statements
Activations toward the educational activities to strengthen parental competencies	<p>"Educational counselling is something I think we do sometimes unintentionally at almost at every meeting, because it's part of our work ..." (II. 55- 56).</p> <p>"I'm trying to show this mother that it is different with this child [regarding] rules in upbringing" (V. 76, 114).</p> <p>"How to act towards children ... how to play with children, so many mothers don't get this at all ..." (VI. 113, 128).</p> <p>"For example, when I go to the school I deal with the mother in terms of what is needed for the baby, how can the baby develop, materials, then we sit down at the table and start some motor exercises, drawing, relaxation techniques, learning colours, shapes ..." (IV. 62).</p> <p>"... most often I help with preparing the kids for school. I show the mom how to teach a child ... I'm trying to bring them a lot of textual material; I set them out for the family and show how them to work with it. Then they will show me what they have done at our next meeting" (IX. 84-86).</p>
Activations of leisure time activities	<p>"So in terms of leisure time activities we discuss the possibilities of the family, what can be done for children during summer, even if they don't have money in the summer ... of course for free time we also ensure that provide the kids information, clubs to be a part of, etc. We often motivate parents toward leisure activities; we are looking for support so that the children are not just sitting at home in front of the TV or inappropriately wasting their free time another way ..." (III. 47-50).</p>
Activations toward resolving economic issues of the family	<p>"... in the management of finances, of course the rent and food must be paid for, the children must have school supplies, and finally, there are incidental expenses for things they do not necessarily need but which can help to get the family situated ..." (III. 27).</p> <p>"... to make the mother realize that she needs to pay her debts. The family has no savings, so for a few months the mother has been scrupulously writing down what she spends, and in this way she is able to set priorities in time, spending money only for what is needed ..." (VII. 88-89).</p>
Activations toward the management of day to day activities	<p>"... for the establishment of a regular day to day routine we must carefully guide these people ..." (I. 207).</p> <p>"... how to properly set up the home regime ..." (VI. 111).</p>

	<p>"So in the beginning we must set up a series of rules in a family where there had been no good habits to begin with" (VIII. 94-95).</p>
Activations of training in social competencies	<p>"... for those parents it is, then, training, for example handling oneself on the telephone, dealing with officials from various institutions, and so on ..." (IV. 66).</p> <p>"We practice simple conversations, which some of them just can't seem to get the knack of ..." (V. 122).</p> <p>"Training for basic situations that he could expect, what would be expected of him, so that he is prepared" (VIII. 76).</p>
Providing support and burden management	<p>"... definitely to support the family, to state what the possibilities are and to draw attention to risks" (I. 72).</p> <p>"... I will place before the client several variants of a solution, basically guiding him to the best decision, evaluating the negatives, give him self-confidence and psychological support, to give everyone the courage to be committed to a resolution ..." (IV. 47).</p> <p>"... when they have us behind them, they feel more confident ..." (VIII. 156).</p>

Social workers are professionally engaged in educational activities within the realm of moral values, in the emotional sphere, in the acquisition and strengthening of parents' social competences as well as related to the clients' overall personal development. Workers take into account the specifics of the environment and deal with the prevention of risks primarily related to education, but also with compensation for the concrete effects of the individual client's behaviour on their own personality or on the social environment ([Sekera, 2012](#)).

### 3.2.3 Coping with stress

Resilience represents the quality of adaptive abilities that help adequately handle dynamic environmental conditions, i.e., to cope with potentially stressful interactions without significantly impairing the functioning of the personality ([Paulík, 2017](#)). "In this field, we often deal with situations in which we need to address a current crisis situation here and now ..." (II: 69). Psychological resistance is one of the most important factors that determine work performance and supports the overall quality of work results:

*I had to learn how to deal with crisis situations, I had to teach these people to calm down. When I come to the family and there is a crisis, I think I can get people to the level of having fun. I'm a good listener, so I listen to what people say and make them feel like I understand them (I: 145-147).*

Coping with stressful situations in families is an essential skill needed by personnel to know how to work with clients' crises. A crisis is any situation subjectively perceived as unmanageable with the available means ([Cimrmannová et al., 2013](#)). This can be evidenced by one testimony that corroborates the importance of the worker taking the situation into his own hands and providing insights for the client.

*The client's brain already has problems in his life and is struggling, and in a crisis these coping mechanisms cease to work and you first need to calm him down. You have to find out what matters most to him in the given situation, about his most pressing need; then you assure him, support him, show him some potential solutions and direct him to an expert if necessary (IV: 124-129).*

The work is a lot about contact and interaction, thus responses should be regulated emotionally. For example, trying to control unpleasant experiences requires a certain amount of energy. Controlling emotional energy means that it can be put to more efficient use. "Surely not to keep those emotions inside or to discount a client's disappointment, but to describe the situation as it really is" (II: 203-204). When a client becomes angry, the worker can direct the interactions more persuasively. "The client feels that I'm taking charge of the situation, but I always behave with respect" (III: 107). The client

accepting this directiveness is related to the belief of one's own ability to control and manage events within the range of control – the admission of helplessness. This acceptance by the client may be framed within working limits: “I felt bad in the role when I was trying to help but was unsuccessful” (VI: 71-72). Feelings of stress may occasionally appear in the environments in which the workers move: “... I was quite worried about my work, even afraid that something may happen to me personally when I go to location and it is a bit of a mess, but then these feelings all went away” (VIII: 146-147). Or difficulties in emergency situations:

*Certain circumstances arise that you simply have no control over, so you have to somehow reconcile yourself to this. There were two suicides, so in such a unnatural situation of course a person becomes much more concerned, thinking about what he did wrong, what he could have done otherwise, questions like these come up (IV: 165-169).*

In dealing with the stress, some resilience is definitely needed in the profession. Resilience is not a simple phenomenon, but is a consequence of a context of various phenomena and circumstances ([Bartelt, 1994](#)). “Working with people evokes emotions in a person which cannot be resolved by simply closing the door and ending your working hours” (VII: 91-92).

### 3.3 Activation as family support

The category of ACTIVATION (3), which represents the main activity within the overall context, includes 9 codes: Locating resources together, Motivation to change, Practical training, Playfulness, Management of activities, Demonstration of possible solutions, Encouraging the family to resolve its own issues, in vivo stimulus, kick. Activation can be described as a process that leads people toward a certain activity. The concept of activation demonstrates and explains how social prevention is actually practiced. How is the process perceived by the workers themselves?

*It most likely means that the family is looking for resources among themselves, and I'm activating those resources ... when someone begins looking into how their system is functioning, for them it's 'a clear motivator to change' ... (I: 28-29, 101).*

Specific activities include: “practicing conversation” (V: 122), “engaging parents in preparing their children for school” (IX: 76), and “the need to pay debts” (III: 37). One interesting comment referred to:

*The feeling one gets when one is able to convince another person who has no faith in himself at all that despite all odds he must find a way to improve his condition, to resolve his own situation, and he does not have to rely on anyone else but himself (III: 29-30).*

The goal of activation in these services is therefore to support processes that result in a higher degree of independence. Activation can also be understood as a process in which the central question becomes: What motivates the client to become energetic and active or what could motivate him / her? Activation is not only a blind offering of a wide range of activities, but also a process of seeking individual client motivation ([Vojířová, 2012](#)). These individual areas of activation have been delineated as educational activities (see Table 2). On the other hand, this process is not a panacea and depends on the wishes, the willingness as well as the capacities of clients. “Every client is different; each has their own possibilities and their own limits as to what he can achieve” (II: 31).

### 3.4 Working in the field as a natural social environment

Social pedagogy as a discipline focuses on the role of the environment (especially social space) in the educational process ([Kraus, 2014](#)). The quality of the social environment plays an important role in preventing and eventually deepening the consequences associated with specific deficits in the

behaviour of children and adolescents (Vávrová, Hrbáčková, & Hladík, 2015). This focus also justifies our interest in the place of the socialization process, as the family takes part in this. From this point we can move to field work, which helps to promote the socialization process as direct involvement in the family.

The category FIELD WORK (4) represents an alternative environment in which emerging forms of support services for disadvantaged children and families are being provided in response to the Czech government's national strategy on the protection of children's rights ("[Action plan](#)," 2018). In what ways do social workers view this alternative as specific and more advantageous than institutional forms? Our survey responses were collected under these codes: Individual work, Detecting hidden meanings, Understanding causal connections, Naturality and reality, Risk. "It is such individual work; the family is waiting for me, and we have an understood goal" (VIII: 145). These considerations lead to greater complexity.

*We are able to perceive even the little nuances within in the family; I can see a lot of things, what the relationships are in the family, who is the most involved and does not participate in child rearing, the relationship with the parents and among the siblings. I notice the small things that other in most cases are unable to see (IV: 56-57).*

On the basis of these observations, it is possible that the workers can reveal other contexts: "I can see and explain what is happening, why the child is late for school when she was dropped off right in front; why her mother says that the child was sent to school and in fact was not" (I: 115-119). Working in the natural social environment brings further advantages to the workers. "We meet him where he feels comfortable and where he feels safe" (II: 79-80). [Matoušek and Pazlarová \(2014\)](#) describe these benefits of this kind of contact. On the other hand, workers have been mentioned negatives related to their own stress and the risk from working in the environment: "... I was quite worried about my work, even afraid that something may happen to me personally when I go to location and it is a bit of a mess, but then these feelings all went away" (VIII: 146-147). "For about a year I would go home unhappy because everything on me was stinking. My coat, sweater, underwear, bra, I had to wash everything. Eventually I was able to deal with it" (IX: 126-127).

### 3.5 Sources influencing self-efficacy

Intervening conditions in the paradigmatic model act upon a worker's proficiency and these point to a blending with social cognitive theory. In the interviews these were denoted as SOURCES INFLUENCING SELF-EFFICACY (5), consisting of 4 subcategories: Experience, Transferred experience, Encouragement, Emotional states.

#### 3.5.1 Experience

The following statements by the respondents correspond with Bandura ([1994](#), [1997](#)), i.e., they demonstrate the power of experience in developing proficiency:

*I think that the experiences I have acquired since I started to do field service are very important; there have been so many life and work experiences and it's still vital to constantly learn, and practice is greatly enhanced by education (I: 80-81).*

"I think it still surprises me that the work has not become stereotypical, that it cannot be predicted to go along the beaten track; experience plays a huge role and new situations always come up again and again ..." (III: 135-136). "I know my limitations, but when one has a general overview, knows where to turn to and how to function well, then he is always gathering new experiences, so that's quite important" (IV: 159-160).

### 3.5.1 Transferred experience

According to Bandura (1994, 1997), the second source for proficiency is learning through significant others or transferred experience. In the statements we coded this aspect from 2 particular points of view, one of them being the transfer of experience towards the client:

*[...] sometimes when working with a client and I see that she has similar concerns as I do, I use this opportunity and tell her that I have recently experienced the same thing, so I know how they feel and what helped me in the situation, and I try to draw on that to help clients because they experience similar concerns as we do (VI: 270-271).*

The second view is of the transfer of experience towards fellow workers, however this was notable in the responses by the indication of a lack of such experiences:

*The need for more long-term training, I think I would benefit from it even on a personal level, I think I would feel more prepared. I know a training course does not prepare one for some absolutely essential things, but at least I would have the feeling that I have done something to push myself, as they say. I would certainly welcome this (V: 20-24).*

What is indicated in these statements is a certain lack of training in soft skills: "I still have something to learn, I am not working at 100%, but I try; I would rather have some examples, I cannot imagine it like this ..." (IX: 235-236). At the same time, we encountered opinions that transferred experience is strengthened by more long-term training: "... the more hours you have worked, the more you are able to function with assurance; it is very important to develop both professionally as well as psychologically ..." (I: 231).

### 3.5.2 Encouragement

As the third source of self-efficacy, encouragement is categorized into 3 important codes: colleague support: "In talking about problems with clients, chatting with colleagues that one can trust, resolving issues, that is very important and encouraging" (VI: 268-269). "The team helps me a great deal" (VIII: 225). Another very important means for worker support is supervision, i.e., practical training of professional ethics, awareness of the processes that take place between the employee and the client, the search for alternatives (Kopřiva, 2013):

*[...] because you go there, you try something, you are there twice, three times a week, you go there to help the person ... it was quite demanding, then we had the supervision, so we resolved the issues then and there, and that was that (IX: 54- 59).*

Nevertheless, whether to include this code as a transfer of experience or encouragement and feedback could be disputed. One important source of empowerment is the feedback provided to the worker. This feedback is primarily based on the client's response to the worker, which can be judged as a criterion of the quality of work. In which ways professional competencies are best reflected in statements like:

*[...] it is something that reflects us in that trust, in establishing the relationship between the client and the worker; this work takes a long time ... if we can, we'll get specific feedback from the client; even if he does not tell us himself, his concrete actions can show us (II: 121-123).*

Creating a good relationship between a worker and other family members can compensate for a possible deficit in the area of the primary relationship, but it can also accelerate the curiosity of the client, his willingness to recognize issues and to learn. If a worker performs these tasks in a adeptly, it increases the chances that clients will trust in these abilities and will consider the work helpful

(Dryden, 2008). "I think that if the client is able to deal with the problems himself, this is on the basis of trust ..." (III: 120-121).

### 3.5.3 Emotional states

The fourth source consists of the emotional and physiological states of the workers. The influence of this factor on self-efficacy is self-evident, since the momentary as well as long-term state of a person has a connection to the overall personality. With a view toward the ambivalence of human experience, we have identified 2 codes: Well-being and Disharmony.

*Mental well-being is very important when working with people; as soon as I get angry at work, or if I come and project my negative feelings on to the client, the relationship dies immediately. I won't be able to do anything with her or move her in any way. So much depends on the worker's well-being or on the ability to turn off the effects of any personal problems the worker may be experiencing (IV: 237-238).*

Physiological aspects play an important role in activities requiring physical activity. "Sometimes it's just to make adjustments, to decide what's important to do right now and what isn't, what I can put off till later, and then I consider whether I can manage today or not" (VII: 265-266). A crucial role is played by how the individual deals with health issues. Adverse physical conditions such as headache or a blood pressure problem can affect performance psychosomatically on an unconscious level or by physical impairments, both of which may be reflected in lower willpower, determination, or by a negative perception of themselves in a given situation: "It gets exhausting when a person when is not feeling well - he just wants others around him" (VI: 162). "Yeah, of course, when I'm in pain or I'm having health problems sometimes I cut the meeting short" (V: 283-284). In addition, mental disharmony makes it easier for an individual to remember or dwell upon past failures or setbacks, resulting logically in increased anxiety regarding failure in line with his lower expectations (Bandura, 1997).

### 3.6 Attitudes toward clients

In the performance of work duties, the category ATTITUDES TOWARD CLIENTS (6) is revealed in the strategies and practices applied in contact with and in advice to the client. In this classification, 9 codes have been defined in the research that are linked to the central phenomenon of self-efficacy. Many different models for guidance and advice to clients have been proposed. Kraus and Poláčeková (2001) draw attention to personal decision making and the proportion of human and professional factors of workers as influencing what style of work they choose. For the present work we have chosen the properties that appeared most often in our research sample: Establishing a relationship, Trust, Communication, Empathic listening, Understanding, Openness, Naturalness, Intuition, Inducing a personal level of contact. These codes were repeated in our research and they also coincide with the competencies workers indicated as important to their work (see subchapter 3.2).

It is important to mention the form of communication in relation to clients. Communication in this case indicates not only a process of transferring information, but forms the basic component of interaction between the worker and the client. "Communication at work is very important, the ability to establish a relationship, to be able to speak freely with clients" (VI: 153). "It is mostly about communication, even non-verbal aspects; when a worker can read a client well, it gives him more information than a half an hour of talk" (IV: 95).

Jandourek (2012) points out that at present the emphasis is on personal growth, autonomy, racial, class and gender equality, as well as equality between the worker and the client. Since these alternative considerations in regard to working with the family have emerged, noticeably different solutions to problems have developed. This work begins with an individual approach to the client based mainly on a partnership approach along with communication techniques that help to establish and maintain the motivation of children and parents, creating a relationship of trust between workers and

family members ([Bechyňová & Konvičková, 2011](#)). What is important in communication that manifests itself in relation to the client? "Avoiding mistakes in communication that can be made by the workers like moralizing, trivialization [of clients' ideas or feelings], projection; one has to pay attention" (IV: 112-114). Naturalness was evaluated as an important component, the core of which is to simply be oneself ([Rogers, 1995](#)).

*And maybe if she had known from the beginning that we were in the same position, I mean personally, that I wasn't playing games with her, then she would have taken my advice differently. She looked at me like I was a different person than I really am, she got me all wrong (VI: 170-173).*

The professional is then a real person, i.e., he does not develop a professional mask and he also expresses to what extent he is open to experience; he knows his strengths and weaknesses, accepts responsibility for his actions and is able to maintain a sincere, empathic understanding and unconditional acceptance of the client ([Šiffelová, 2010](#)). This relationship is based on an attitude characterized by attention and respect for the client as he communicates. The focus is on interpersonal contact, an exchange of experiences and an understanding of yourself and others. It follows that fostering this type of rapport is hardly possible in situations where manipulation or authoritarian management and over-organization prevail. [Motching and Nykl \(2011\)](#) have indicated how people can develop optimally in a climate characterized by what have been called Rogers' variables. [Rogers \(1995\)](#) has described how the problems of an individual can be solved in a close, long-term relationship if those involved are able to create an atmosphere of true warmth and understanding. The basic hypothesis is that individuals have in themselves the potential for self-understanding and the transformation of their own self-image, basic attitudes and behaviours in an atmosphere of facilitating psychological attitudes. This means that from the point of view of the communication process or the communication relationship within the profession it is the social worker who is to a certain level able to perceive and foster these basic human attitudes. These conditions can be applied to any situation directed toward personality development.

The first assumption, according to Rogers, is that the first prerequisite in creating the atmosphere of change, is the acceptance, interest, and confidence that [Rogers \(1995, p. 121\)](#) calls *unconditional positive acceptance*. The second facilitating aspect is empathic understanding, indicating that a worker is aware of the feelings and personal beliefs the client holds and experiences. These can take the form of meanings that the client is fully aware of, but also those that are below his or her level of consciousness. Such sensitive and active listening is, however, very rare. The third assumption is the authenticity in which the worker is openly experiencing the feelings and attitudes that are emerging from the client. The worker is able to realize what the client is experiencing. "I have no problem simply telling the client outright what bothers me about the situation as I see it, because only frankness and honesty can construct a meaningful relationship" (IX: 203).

There is therefore closely interconnected congruence between what is experienced at the level of the body and what is the actual content of consciousness, and thus what is communicated to the client. People who are accepted and appreciated will soon become more interested in themselves as well as others. If they are listened to empathically, their flow of inner thoughts and experiences will come forth much more readily and reliably. Thus, naturalness is a personality characteristic that can be demonstrated in the worker's approach to the client as well as in the credibility the worker projects: states, "if I were in a crisis situation and a worker came to me who is not doing well himself, I would not trust him, why should I?" (III: 94-95). It is clear that all of the above-mentioned elements are interconnected into a complex of certain qualities which are then reflected in the quality of the work.

### 3.7 Quality of field work

Category (7), labelled QUALITY OF WORK, reflects the effect of the professional interaction of workers as an impact on the effectiveness of activation work with the family. Service work is generally provided on the basis of quality standards of social service authorities in accordance with the legal norms of the

Czech Republic and the European Union in terms of the Ethical Code of Social Workers of the Czech Republic ([Nedělníková & Gojová, 2008](#)). In our case, this measurement consists of the identification of the quality of work by the workers themselves at the relationship level and the educational action towards the client. In this category, 6 codes were included: Long-term involvement, Patience and persistence of a worker, Specific activities of clients, Statements of confidence, Patterns of influence, Conversation.

The individual considerations regarding the reflections of the quality of work from the point of view of workers generally refer to the intensity and the long-term nature of relationships. “Results cannot be seen right away” (VII: 96). “A person must give them time” (III: 173). Since quality reflects working relationships, the role of time is important, i.e., in order to establish trust, a very important condition for further work. “I think it's all about patience with people; I guess a person really has to learn a lot, I know I did. It comes with age – the older I get the more patient I am” (III: 172-173).

In one study, [Kopřiva \(2013\)](#) indicates patience as one feature that emerged in 47% of the surveyed respondents in the helping professions. Patience can be seen in communication when conducting interviews as part of counselling and overall approach to the client: “Conversation is our strongest helper” (II: 170). Through simply speaking with the client, it is possible to focus upon and discuss a number of issues that can help parents gain insights into understanding their children and family relationships, thus they gradually learn to control and correct their own behaviours as best as possible in line with their individual idiosyncrasies.

[Zakouřilová \(2014\)](#) favours the idea that well-guided counselling has in itself a relatively high therapeutic value, especially if it does not lack elements of humanity. These basic elements of empathy can be found in category (6), attitudes toward the client, upon which depends whether or not the workers are able to establish a relationship of trust. Statements of confidence are also reflected in the statements of respondent: “If I am empathetic, this will come through immediately with the client, but after time it is something that will be reflected in the client's trust, in establishing a relationship with him” (II: 117-118). Consistent patterns of behaviour can also have a great influence: “if a client accepts it, a worker can be a model” (IV: 102). The functioning of patterns represents imitation, by which children and adults cognitively process their social experiences along with how the results of that knowledge will further influence their behaviour and development.

According to the theory of simulation learning of Bandura (1977), four components are involved in this process. Firstly, it is through attention that an observer becomes interested in the events that are being modelled, with one example being a client's attention attracted by a worker: “Some are glad that someone is actually doing something with them, they like that interest. They are happy and grateful that someone is paying attention” (VIII: 152-153). The second component, retention, indicates an observed behaviour retained in memory via an image or verbal system: “... they talk a lot among themselves: ‘He comes here and he does that for us, and we are so excited!’ And then I return to the family and maybe there's someone else waiting for me to help” (VIII: 161-164). Reproduction is an appropriate activity similar to modelling behaviour. “So the family is waiting for me, we have a set goal” (VIII: 142).

The fourth component is reinforcement as the final guidance process of learning by imitation. It therefore includes an incentive variable – valuation, which plays a major role in incentivizing and maintaining the motivation of additional clients. “Raise the level of the client's success to motivate others” (II: 41). Valuation reinforces appropriate training and the development of the social and parental competencies of clients as well as trying to eliminate less appropriate behaviours: “... if we can, we get feedback, which is most valuable to us in this work, for me these are the concrete actions and activities of the family” (IX: 240-241).

## 4 Final reflections on the research

The subject of this research project was compiling and analysing the perspectives of social workers on their professional ability in field social activation work with families in the current system for the care of children at risk. The socio-pedagogical nature of our research has led us to focus on the social and educational nature of the work, although the profession is not regulated under the Ministry of Education. The created model includes phenomena with intertwining elements and theoretical concepts which are inextricably bound together and interconnected (see Figure 1). The table shows the mutual social interactions in the existing system.

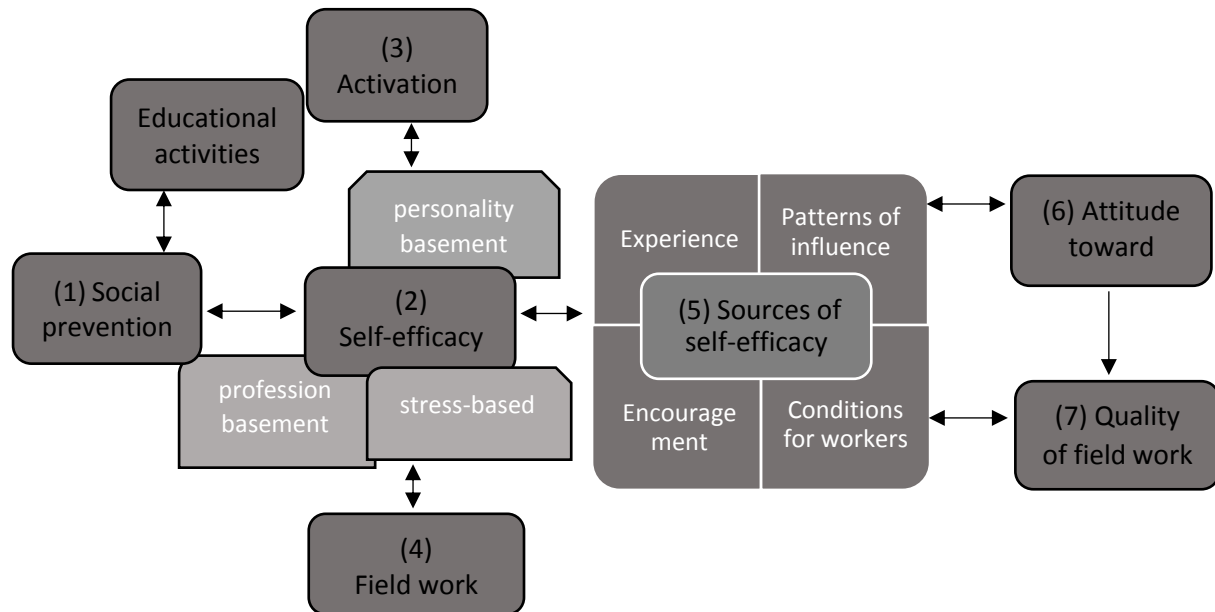


Figure 1. Structural model of SAS in the care system for at-risk children

The Action plan ([“Action plan,” 2018](#)) on the Implementation of the national strategy for the protection of children's rights 2012-2015 has made it necessary to increase societal emphasis on addressing social prevention (1) establishing an approach to workers that to a set extent seeks to educate the target group directly in the natural environment (4) in which they can operate without danger. The nature of the environment will be such that a certain degree of safety and security is guaranteed for everyone, and therefore new alternatives can come forth in terms of emerging services. Therein lies the difference. “We are able to perceive even those tiny nuances that are in the family, to observe a lot of things that we are not normally able to see” (VII: 54-55). Given the diversity of environments, we propose an approach which is more specific and more individualized (6), i.e., an approach based on trust. Given the diversity of work activities involved, creating such relationships requires workers to develop and possess certain qualities and proficiencies (2). The results of the research demonstrated the workers’ interest in quality in three areas: personality-based, profession-based and stress-based concerns. Given that the level of self-efficacy can shape in certain ways the success in the profession, all of these areas must be clearly defined and closely analysed. The question of proficiencies is also related to the professionalism of the employees, their development, the efficiency of the services, as well potential further educational developments in the field. We should determine to a greater degree exactly how these proficiencies as well as other conditions influencing behaviours and social interactions can lead to the altered responses of all actors involved with the goal of contributing to quality work in the field. Accordingly, self-efficacy and other proficiencies are not unchangeable, yet they are factors which can strongly influence the quality of the services provided (7). Findings pertaining to the question of professional proficiency have been consistent in that such attitudes can

positively affect the motivation of a person to achieve the goals and greater performance within a particular profession (Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). From the paradigmatic model outlined here, the central importance of self-efficacy can be delineated, and intervening conditions (5) that can influence the formation of this hidden psychological phenomenon can be designated. The development of professional competencies is a lifelong process that is based on triadic reciprocity between behaviour (self-efficacy), personality (character, temperament), and the external environment (stressfulness) that form the basis of socio-cognitive theory.

Work experience undoubtedly plays a major role in the professional development of social workers. Experience can determine the dynamics of this development, which is particularly evident in younger workers. With experience along with positive feedback, the worker's ability to evaluate her / his own proficiencies and capabilities increases. For example, results by Steyner and Mynhardt (2008) have demonstrated that self-efficacy is influenced by both the subjective view, for example, of the performance itself, as well as on objective information provided by another person about the performance of the individual, i.e., the person can be shown exactly where he was wrong and why. Self-efficacy may also be affected by any situation in which social comparison is involved.

Interesting insights can be gained by examining the current state of the profession, in which great progress is being made at the boundaries between social work and social pedagogy. According to Ondrejko (2009), both social pedagogy and social work can be better established in terms of prevention, i.e., when effective preventive programs are created that will be able to offer systematic, planned and long-term training not only for the conditioning of new outward behaviours, but also for their internalization. Schilling (1999) raises a number of pedagogical aspects in terms of helping to resolving problems in various life situations through activation in educational and training programs (3) geared toward the workers themselves. "The worker in some way educates both the adult and the child; regardless of the client's level of formal schooling or training, education is definitely taking place" (IV: 71-73).

For a well-functioning and professional system of alternative assistance and support for families, the human factor is absolutely essential. This has been confirmed by a study by Vávrová and Krutilová Nováková (2015) in which they identify potential support mechanisms for families within the Czech transformation of the system of care for children at risk instituted in 2009. As a result, more effort and resources are being dedicated to the issues related to competences and proficiencies in the field. This project has greatly influenced the overall quality of social services in the Czech Republic.

How are the current workers in the care system for vulnerable children dealing with their work both personally and professionally? To what degree do they trust their abilities and skills in terms of the educational aspects related to the performance of their job? These kinds of questions point to a great potential for further exploration in these areas. Our goal in the future will be to develop a methodologically sound and reliable research tool with which to explore aspects of workers' professional self-efficacy within their social pedagogical work with families.

*The author declares that this is the original study and text in this form has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published otherwise.*

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The results of the research demonstrated the workers' interest in quality in three areas: personality-based, profession-based and stress-based concerns.

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