

## Teacher as an Amateur Speech Therapist – Current Knowledge in the Field of Speech Therapy Prevention in Kindergartens

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### **Abstract:**

**Introduction:** In our paper, we focus mainly on defining the term of speech therapy prevention, on the anchoring of speech therapy prevention in the legislation and education, the teacher as an actor and direct mediator of the primary speech therapy prevention, and his competence. The research part describes the data obtained by in-depth interviews with teachers in nursery schools in the Zlín region.

**Methods:** The empirical part of the study was conducted through a qualitative research. We have obtained research data via interviews with teachers from nursery schools in the Zlín Region. The data, after transcribing them into written form, were subsequently analysed and interpreted.

**Results:** Based on the results of the research, we can identify one of the most significant categories in the survey of the method of implementation of speech therapy prevention in selected nursery schools in the South Moravian Region. It's called "Teacher as an amateur speech therapist". Within this category, we can also distinguish between three types of teachers: teacher - speech therapist, speech therapy assistant as a substitute of speech therapist, teacher - preventionist, and speech therapist.

**Discussion:** What is the cause of this situation? Poor education? Legislation? Pedagogical practice?

**Limitations:** The research was realized only in the South Moravian Region (CZ) and cannot be applied to the entire population.

**Conclusions:** It is evident from the results of the research that some respondents have insufficient knowledge about the competences of individual actors in the speech therapy prevention process as well as about the realization of speech therapy prevention in kindergartens.

**Key words:** speech therapy prevention, kindergarten, teachers in kindergartens.

## 1 Introduction

Kindergarten education plays an important role in the system of education of children. The concept of preschool education is focused on the personality of the individual and the satisfaction of his/her needs taking into account the specifics of the child. The education of children in kindergarten is realized on the basis of the obligatory curricular document – Framework Educational Program for Preschool Education. The main

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principle of this document is to respect the individuality and particularities of children with regards to their needs and abilities.

Teachers in kindergartens also rely on children's basic needs and on their basis, they try to satisfy their secondary needs, so the child can develop appropriately all areas of his/her personality, as well as his/her speech. Teachers in kindergartens work with child as individualities which have their needs, therefore, a complete diagnostic of the whole class, as well as of each individual is required. This institution fulfils diagnostic, counselling, social, and preventive functions. The teacher is often the first indicative diagnostician to note that something is wrong with the child and can recommend an appropriate professional who can confirm or reject the diagnosis.

The preventive function of kindergartens includes a broad-spectrum of activities that are aimed at timely prevention, minimizing failures and problems that could have an unfavourable effect on the quality of the child's education. It is focuses on specific areas, depending on the current conditions and needs of children. Preventive activities in kindergartens also include the prevention of impaired communication skills (Lipnická, 2015).

Nowadays, the primary speech therapy prevention program is a part of the educational program of kindergartens. However, it is necessary to specify the content and function of these programs, which are often misinterpreted and labelled as specific for teachers in a kindergarten and not for speech therapists.

The research problem of this study is the lack of information on the side of teachers about their role in the speech therapy prevention process. But they also lack knowledge about the implementation of speech therapy prevention and intervention in the educational process of children in kindergartens.

## **2 The terminological definition of the issues examined**

Speech therapy is a science that deals directly with speech therapy prevention and has a trans-disciplinary character. Lechta says (2003) that it is important to perceive the communication ability in its entire breadth and comprehensiveness. Impairment of communication skills is present when a certain level of human language is interfering with its communication intent.

In its broadest sense, prevention can be understood as preventing and avoiding undesirable phenomena in different areas in all age groups (Hartl & Hartlová, 2009). Speech therapy prevention aims to prevent the development of impaired communication skills. It aims to prevent the formation and development of pronunciation disorders and can positively influence the progress of developmental disorders, such as delayed speech development, developmental dysphasia and other disturbances e.g. stuttering or bloating, voice disorders. Speech therapy is most effective when it prevents incorrect fixation of stereotypes in acquiring the pronunciation (Krahulcová, 2013).

Vitásková and Peutelschmiedová (2005) say that primary speech prevention can have a very small impact in relation to impaired communication skills. Of course, we cannot prevent a certain inborn and acquired organ transmutation, impaired speech development or genetically conditioned specific learning disorders, or disorders of speech fluency. However, primary speech therapy prevention may have a positive effect mainly in the case of symptomatic speech disorders, dyslalia, balbuties or voice disorders.

Speech therapy prevention can be divided into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. In our work, we focus only on primary speech therapy prevention, because it is

targeted at the widest population. Most often, it is implemented via an educational activity, which is applied mainly in the intact population. Education is realized through media, press, lectures, conferences, where reflection and presentation of new knowledge and findings in the current situation take place.

Amongst the primary tasks of primary speech therapy prevention, we include education of paediatricians and pedagogues in pre-school settings. Through the awareness of pedagogues and paediatricians, appropriate information is provided to the parents of children, their mutual contacts are established, and an early search of adequate professionals is made possible (Renotírová & Ludíková, 2003).

Not only speech therapists or pedagogues in kindergartens have a great share in natural influencing of speech development, but especially parents, grandparents and other people with whom the child most often comes into contact. They take part in developmental process of the child's speech since he/she is born and have a primary influence on the correct speech development.

### **3 Teachers in the speech therapy prevention process**

A preschool teacher has an important and challenging position in a kindergarten. He/She must dispose of different types of abilities and skills, so he/she can develop a child's personality in all its aspects.

The teacher is a communication model for the child and should support his/her development. The importance of the teacher – child communication and their interaction in the kindergarten is emphasized by Navrátilová (2017) as well.

For a pedagogue in a kindergarten, it is necessary to understand speech therapy prevention in its broadest context. It is essential to create stimulating and appropriate conditions for proper and natural speech development. These conditions are external factors, including the influence of the environment and education involved in the development of impaired communication skills of functional character. Besides the external factors, we can identify certain congenital preconditions and the functional status of receiving analysers (auditory, visual, and speech). We also observe the function of motor areas in the brain, of speech organs and the overall physical, intellectual and psychological development of the child (Klenková, 2006).

Speech therapy prevention is part of the daily program in kindergartens. By educating the child throughout the day, the educator unintentionally develops the child's communication areas and monitors the quality of the child's speech (Vašíková & Žáková, 2017). According to Horňáková, Kapalková and Mikulajová (2005), the teacher is a communication model for the child. The child follows the teacher's expressive abilities and learns to respond in a given situation and to understand the teacher's communicative intention.

It is clear from the interviews with teachers that the incidence of children with impaired communication skills in school practice is becoming more common and cannot be excluded from the pedagogical process. This also raises the need for teachers' abilities and skills in this area. Therefore, for a practicing teacher, it is necessary to be capable to understand both theoretically and practically a full range of specific symptoms that appear, develop and change them in a child until the child reaches an optimum level. It is necessary for the teacher to be able to find effective procedures in the educational practice, to help the child achieve the optimal development of communication skill.

### *3.1 Teacher competences in the process of primary speech therapy prevention*

The natural development of speech and language abilities of children falls within the basic competences, besides others, of a teacher in a kindergarten. This is one of the important areas that is also included in the Framework Educational Program for Preschool Education, and from which the teachers derive when practising the content and scope of their activities during day-to-day activities in kindergartens. Further qualifications and special focus are not necessary for the development of the natural evolution of a child's speech.

The definition of teacher competences is covered by several authors but for the area of speech therapy prevention we use the division according to Lipnická (2013).

The above author defines:

1. Teachers' theoretical competences – the pedagogue should be well versed in the field of language-communication education, he/she should be adequately linguistically equipped as he/she is a speech model for the child. He/she should have also knowledge about the developmental stages of a child based on the child's age, he/she should be well versed in the onto-genesis of speech, he/she should know the actual specialized materials in the field of speech therapy.
2. Teachers' communication competences – to openly support the communication skills of the child, to give him/her space in his/her speech, to support the linguistic and speech skills of the child, the teacher should express him/herself competently in the process of pedagogical diagnostics, during the development of diagnostic materials and plans, the teacher should intentionally influence situations in a positive direction via language skills and lead monologues and dialogues with the child.
3. Teachers' didactic competences – it's necessary to apply an individual approach to the child, to communicate with parents and to provide the parents with needed information regarding the level of the child's speech, to handle the diagnostics of speech as a part of the diagnostics of the child's entire personality.
4. Teachers' intrapersonal competences – managing critical thinking in stressful situations, social-emotional stability.
5. Teachers' interpersonal competence – cooperation with the child, teamwork, participation in joint decisions, solving conflicts in a given situation adequately.
6. Teachers' reflective competences – the ability of self-assessment, consistent reflection on one's own work, which is the basis for self-improvement.

### *3.2 Primary speech therapy prevention in the school system - legislative basis*

Circles of speech therapy prevention are arising in the last few years under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports due to the increasing prevalence of communication problems in preschool children. These are being led by so-called speech therapy preventionists. Their activities are based on the Methodological recommendation ref. 14712 / 2009-61 that serves to ensure speech therapy in schools, and, among other things, sets rules and defines the competences of speech therapists, speech therapy assistants, including the competences of teachers in kindergartens and elementary schools in speech therapy prevention.

Additionally, the "Primary Speech Therapy Prevention" course, which is provided by the Association of Speech Therapy in Education, is necessary for the realization and ensuring of proper speech development in the context of speech therapy prevention. It is typical for these courses that pedagogues work in direct contact with five children or

pupils of the appropriate age category for two months. The course can be attended by kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers.

On the basis of this course, the teacher is able to interconnect knowledge in the field of communication skills and competences of the child in the area of pedagogical diagnostics. However, the teacher does not become a speech therapist after the successful completion of the course, which is a common misunderstanding in practice. Therefore, a pre-school teacher work should remain at the level of prevention and natural development of children's speech skills. He/she does not engage in the correction of defective pronunciation or in speech therapy diagnostics and therapy. But, on the other hand, he/she uses his/her knowledge and skills to co-operate with speech therapists in special pedagogical centres and, above all, with clinical speech therapists in health care, whose professional competences and qualifications allow them to work with persons with impaired communication ability.

A speech therapy assistant, who has at least a bachelor's degree with final state examination in Speech Therapy, respectively in Deaf Education from a state university in specialization Special Pedagogy - Speech Therapy, is also involved in the process of primary speech therapy prevention. Speech therapy assistants can engage in targeted speech therapy prevention circles. This education enables them to perform more specialized job (Methodological recommendation ref. 14712 / 2009-61 ensuring speech therapy in Education).

School counselling facilities, i.e. pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and special pedagogical centres SPC are a part of the school system. Speech therapy intervention, by which the presence of specialized workers is required, falls into the competence of these facilities. This includes centres providing services for pupils with speech, visual, auditory, physical, mental disabilities, for pupils with autism spectrum disorders, deaf-blind pupils and for pupils with multiple disabilities. The activities of these centres are defined and regulated by the Education Act ref. 561/2004 Coll., Decree ref. 27/2016 Coll., and especially in Decree ref. 197/2016 Coll. They provide both outpatient and outreach services.

#### **4 Teacher as an amateur speech therapist**

In the following part of the paper, we will present a part of the research, which was realized with kindergarten teachers in the South Moravian Region in 2016.

We respond to the facts from large-scale foreign research, such as Nelson et al., 2006, Korpilahti et al, 2016, Klem, et al., 2016, that concern late development of speech and language skills of preschool children, based on data from not very research-covered area of speech therapy prevention.

The main goal of this research was to clarify the way of implementation of speech therapy prevention in selected kindergartens in the South Moravian Region.

The aims of our research are as follows:

- a) to clarify the way of implementation of speech therapy prevention in selected kindergartens in the South Moravian Region,
- b) to find out how aware the interviewed teachers are about the competences of the particular actors in the process of speech prevention.

The research sample was made up of 35 teachers working in kindergartens in the Zlín Region. Of this number, 10 teachers were university graduates, 24 teachers with secondary education and 1 teacher did not have pedagogical education.

Based on in-depth interviews, that were subsequently recorded in written form and encoded, we identified several semantic categories that we then analysed and interpreted. Within a significant category dealing with the teachers' reflection on speech therapy prevention and the way of its realization, we identified a sub-category named "teacher as an amateur speech therapist". In this sub-category, we described three types of preschool educators in the process of speech therapy prevention in kindergartens.

This area is characteristic for interviewed teachers who have fundamental deficiencies in the knowledge of their job description and they intervene in the work of clinical speech therapists. Unfortunately, in practice, we have noticed that this phenomenon occurs very often in the statements of the interviewed teachers.

Within this sub-category, we can distinguish between three other types of teachers:

- The first is the so-called "teacher-speech therapist". We have to say that this type of a teacher is characterized in the context of speech therapy prevention by performing unprofessional interventions in the development of the language and communication skills of preschool children. These are actions focused the rectification or correction of the wrong sound.
- The second type is the "speech therapy assistant as a substitute of speech therapist". We deduce from the realized interviews that there is insufficient knowledge about the work and job description of a speech therapy assistant. When teachers attribute the ability to pursue speech therapy intervention to a speech therapy assistant, they attribute him/her the role of a clinical speech therapist. This is proven by the following statement of an interviewed teacher:  
*"Yes. I think all teachers can do it. The one who corrects the sounds and the defects of speech goes to that speech therapy course. I mean there is always at least one teacher like that in every kindergarten who does speech therapy in particular, individually with children. He/she already knows which child has a problem and he/she is practising with the child according to his/her problem".*
- The next, third type of teachers is the "teacher-preventionist and speech therapist". As the title suggests, it is a pedagogue capable of speech therapy prevention and he/she performs it with all children in the class, but also interferes with and substitutes the work of speech therapist in the sense of rectification and correction of the bad pronunciation of sounds. These teachers describe the notion of "speech therapy" as a process in which teachers engage in breathing and articulation exercise during the day, but they also strive for proper pronunciation and remedy. Often, they also mention using a speech mirror for these exercises

## **5 Conclusion**

In the conclusion of this paper, we consider necessary to mention that we present and draw attention to a qualitatively oriented research aimed at finding out how to implement speech therapy prevention in kindergartens.

Our findings show that educators representing the semantic category "teacher as an amateur speech therapist" understand speech therapy prevention primarily as a remedy of incorrectly drawn sounds. According to the statements of the participants, speech therapy prevention is realized primarily individually, or it is realized by a speech therapy assistant who has passed a course of primary speech prevention. However, in the decree of Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, in the job description of speech therapy assistants, the scope of action is clearly defined as aimed at support of

the natural development of communication skills and abilities in pre-school children. Correction of defective pronunciation falls uncompromisingly into the competences of clinical speech therapists or speech therapists in education.

Finally, it should be noted that a lack of awareness and understanding of the meaning and realization of primary speech therapy prevention in kindergartens plays a crucial role. Unacquainted teachers can do more harm in practice than bring benefits for children's speech development. There are also types of teachers that renounce responsibility and specialize in a different direction. They attribute this responsibility to preschool educators who have completed a course of primary speech prevention.

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