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Trans-disciplinary Cooperation in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Intervention with Emphasis on the Speech and Language Therapist’s Important Role

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Abstract

The contribution analyses the knowledge of aberrations affecting non-verbal communication in children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) from the perspective of speech and language therapists (SLTs) working in schools as well as in medical settings in the Czech Republic via a questionnaire (n= 69 responding SLTs of 369 originally addressed). 50.72% of SLTs perceive the specifics regarding disruption of nonverbal communication. The most frequent deficits detected are those relating to pragmatics (44.93%), the lexical-semantic linguistic level (21.74%) and the morphological-syntactic linguistic level (20.29%). The research highlighted visible deficits associated mainly with the knowledge domain of SLTs within ASD.

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Keywords: autism spectrum disorders; speech and language therapy; speech and language therapist; language impairment; non-verbal communication; pragmatics

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders constitute a broad group of disorders characterized, among other things, by disordered communication at individual language levels with significant predominance of communication pragmatics disorders. Individual symptoms strongly affect the non-verbal component of communication, in some

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cases even much more strongly than verbal abilities (oral or graphical) (Chiang, Soong, Li, & Rogers, 2008). Since they concern specific characteristic manifestations of communication activity, they are included, according to Lechta's classification (see for e.g. Lechta, 2002), in the so-called symptomatic speech disorders. Since communication is the basis of social interaction and its evaluation is, in many respects, the basis for evaluating an individual's development level, the possible diagnosis or intervention in the impairment is the center of interest and the main subject of many professions relating to education and development consultancy.

Autism spectrum disorders, being forms of impaired communication, are dealt with by professional workers specializing in impaired communication ability – speech and language therapists. In the Czech Republic, as well as in many other countries (see for e.g. CPLOL/NetQues, 2013), speech and language therapy intervention is implemented, in particular, in the departments of education and health; speech and language therapists work in schools or school consulting facilities or in private or public healthcare facilities or speech and language therapy outpatient's departments (consulting rooms). The speech and language therapists' preparatory professional study takes place at pedagogical colleges within the study programme 'Special Education'. Subsequently, speech and language therapists working independently in a clinical/medical environment must fulfil the specialization study requirements imposed by the field of clinical speech and language therapy.

In our opinion, in speech and language therapy intervention, it is necessary to respect the principle of transdisciplinarity represented by the equal standing of, and the respect for, individual professions of the experts involved in impaired communication ability diagnosis or intervention. In particular, in the sphere of education of individuals with impaired communication ability, it is necessary to involve all members of a complex team (a speech and language therapist, a consultant, a pre-school or school educator, parents, and others) so that their activities and the information provided by them can lead to efficient diagnosis or intervention and, therefore, to eliminating impaired communication ability or inhibiting its impact.

1.1. Specifics of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Context of Complex Intervention

Education of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), which is currently trying to reflect preference for the inclusive trend in the Czech Republic, constitutes increased requirements on the educators or, possibly, the assistants of educators, working in the so-called education mainstream. These requirements accentuate both the sphere of knowledge and interdisciplinary cooperation. Certain requirements are also oriented on the personality prerequisites of the professional educating a child with ASD, and, of course, the classmates who considerably predict the school atmosphere must not be forgotten either. Koegel & Koegel (2001) point out that social deficits and problems associated with communication in individuals with ASD are such striking symptoms of the clinical picture of this disorder that according to the stated author, trouble-free social interaction with these individuals' peers is practically impossible. This statement is supported by Harrower & Dunlap (2001) who accentuate that a student with ASD needs several facilitation means and intervention focused on the practicing of social situations in order to interact with other people functionally. However, in this respect, we consider as important to state the research study implemented by Boutot & Bryant (2005) and focused on the analysis of social integration of ten students with ASD at a common-type school providing elementary education. The research group was composed of 177 students, of whom 26 were diagnosed with ASD (Asperger syndrome). The primary goal of the given examination was to detect the social preferences within the selected research group through a sociometric scale consisting of 6 questions. The result was that upon comparing intact classmates and classmates with ASD, the results were statistically indifferent and were not subject to the projection of symptoms associated with this impairment. Thus, according to Boutot & Bryant (2005), ASD diagnosis is not interferential when it comes to making contact with peers. However, it is important to add in relation to the given research that the students attended intensive training on the issue of ASD within the given school, which can be considered as a factor by which the presented results were significantly influenced. Hence, it is obvious that despite the strenuousness associated with social inclusion of an individual with ASD, systematic education and awareness may result in positive integration into the school environment.

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