

# Role of the physiotherapist and speech therapist in preschool and early childhood education in Colombia

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DOI: [10.22517/25395203.25378](https://doi.org/10.22517/25395203.25378)

## Abstract

**Introduction:** physiotherapist and speech therapists as health professionals have an impact on the educational role by performing actions within their competences of early and timely detection of the alterations that frequently occur in early education and preschool at the level of motor and communicative processes.

**Objective:** to reflect on the role of the physiotherapist and the speech therapist in early childhood education and preschool in Colombia.

**Reflection:** it is important to include physiotherapists and speech therapists in the educational sector, forming interdisciplinary groups together with teachers, families, and educational institutions in order to have a positive impact on the communicative well-being and motor development of the population in early childhood and preschool education.

**Conclusion:** the importance of including physiotherapists and speech therapists in the interdisciplinary team in the educational sector is highlighted, in order to address early on the difficulties that may arise at the communicative level and in motor development in an early stage.

**Keys words:** Physical Therapy; Physiotherapy; Speech Therapy; Education; Communication; Child Development; Learning; Social inclusion; Child Welfare.

## Resumen

**Introducción:** los fisioterapeutas y fonoaudiólogos como profesionales de la salud generan impacto en el rol educativo realizando acciones dentro de sus competencias de detección temprana y oportuna de las alteraciones que se presentan frecuentemente en educación inicial y preescolar a nivel

de los procesos motores y comunicativos.

**Objetivo:** realizar una reflexión sobre el rol del fisioterapeuta y el fonoaudiólogo en la educación inicial y preescolar de niños en Colombia.

**Reflexión:** es necesaria la inclusión de los fisioterapeutas y los fonoaudiólogos en el sector educativo, formando grupos interdisciplinarios en conjunto con los docentes, familias, e instituciones educativas con el fin de impactar positivamente en el bienestar comunicativo y desarrollo motor de la población que se encuentra en educación inicial y preescolar.

**Conclusión:** se resalta la importancia de incluir a los fisioterapeutas y fonoaudiólogos en el equipo interdisciplinario en el sector educativo, con el fin de abordar de manera temprana las dificultades que puedan generarse a nivel comunicativo y en el desarrollo motor.

**Palabras claves:** fisioterapia, fonoaudiología, educación, comunicación, desarrollo infantil, aprendizaje, inclusión social, bienestar del niño.

### **Introduction**

Education in Colombia is a right that every child has, therefore, access to and permanence in the educational system must be guaranteed and ensured to all minors, through public or private educational institutions.

It is common for children to begin their education at an early age. Before the age of five they usually start early education where through play, art and literature they favor child development (1) and then they move on to preschool education which corresponds to that offered to children for their integral development in the biological, cognitive, psychomotor, socio-affective and spiritual aspects, through pedagogical and recreational socialization experiences, being the transition grade mandatory for children under six years of age (2). The work team is mainly composed of professionals in early childhood care and educators from different areas, but in recent years the participation of health professionals, such as physiotherapists and speech therapists, has been observed, who within their actions provide comprehensive care to children.

Specifically, physiotherapy is a liberal profession in the health area, where its field of action is projected to all scenarios where human beings move throughout their life cycle, being its objective the maintenance, optimization, or enhancement of human body movement, as well as the prevention and recovery of its alterations (3). Phonoaudiology is an autonomous, independent profession that intervenes in the communicative processes of the human being, speech, language and hearing disorders; the variations and

communicative differences and the communicative well-being of the individual, human groups and populations (4).

In this sense, this article proposes a conception of the role of the physiotherapist and speech therapist in early childhood education and preschool in Colombia, based on the experience of the last years of participation in research projects and significant experiences from research groups, where the population has been children from public and private educational institutions.

## **Reflection**

### **At the international level**

Education is a global priority, it is one of the objectives of sustainable development, where inclusive, equitable and quality education must be guaranteed, as well as promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all(5), in this sense it is evident the need to include professionals who from their competencies address the development of the child population, seeking the acquisition of skills necessary to initiate the learning processes that are accompanied by multiple challenges.

In the case of the United States, it is evident that the physical therapist is part of the interdisciplinary work of the educational system, through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) created in 2004 where students receive physical therapy services at school (6). For its part, in Spain, there is the figure of the educational physiotherapist, whose work integrates the educational structures to facilitate access to the curriculum of children with special educational needs, mainly those with physical disabilities (7), this professional has the skills to enhance the welfare and learning of students, especially from the area of inclusion and disability (8). They also intervene in the non-disabled population through appropriate stimulation, promote the neurodevelopment of children, identify and act in a timely manner in children who present a delay in neuropsychomotor development in order to promote school performance (9). Similarly, through physical activity, it promotes executive functions, such as attention, concentration and memory, being useful to improve academic performance and at the same time control children's excess weight (10).

In the speech therapy field, it can be affirmed that the participation of the speech therapist in the educational system is fundamental since he/she is the professional in charge of evaluating and treating children with communication problems and, in turn, guides and collaborates with teachers

to help people to communicate, solve problems and make decisions more effectively (11). In the case of Chile, the speech therapist is the ideal professional to treat the educational needs derived from communication and language disorders. Likewise, this field is approached in a comprehensive manner thanks to the support of other disciplines such as psychopedagogy, special education and psychology, among others (12).

By performing interdisciplinary management with the motor area, it is evident that an impact is generated in the communicative skills. For example, in Spain, the greatest progress is generated in motor and language skills, mainly at the expressive level and in specific conditions such as children with a history of extreme prematurity, the communicative-linguistic competence acquires great relevance in academic performance, and the possible difficulties that may have a negative impact on academic results and compromise their academic and professional future; therefore, timely intervention is essential and effective (13).

### **National**

In Colombia, different authors have demonstrated the importance of the physiotherapist in the classroom, Hoyos et al. (14) identify the activities that the professional can perform, such as helping with school inclusion, providing advice to the teacher, and promoting physical activity (14). Also, Lerma et al. (15) in their study, through physiotherapeutic assessment, found a significant number of children with global psychomotor alertness in an early education center (15), which highlights this professional in the timely diagnosis in relation to neurodevelopment.

Likewise, the role of the speech therapist in preschool and elementary school has been highlighted by attending students whose educational, social or personal progress is affected by difficulties at the communicative level, as well as evaluating and intervening children with learning problems in order to prevent communicative disorders (16).

From experience, it has been observed the need to include these health professionals in the educational sector, different studies at national and international level show it.

Although the presence of the speech therapist and the physiotherapist in education is relevant, in the Colombian education system they do not receive the recognition required to contribute to the quality education of school children, therefore, the paradigms about these professionals must be broken, since the support from the classroom will allow teachers to guide

them on the needs of children, to act in a timely manner from an early diagnosis and to promote their growth and development.

### **Conclusion**

In Colombia, it is important the participation of physiotherapists and speech therapists in the educational sector, as health professionals, in order to generate a timely and efficient approach in the educational field to the population with or without alterations; it is evident the need to include them within the interdisciplinary groups with the teachers of the educational institutions. Although so far, the participation of these professionals has only been observed in private educational institutions, it is necessary that public institutions include these professionals to address frequent and common disorders.

Finally, through international and national evidence, it is demonstrated that the physiotherapist and the speech therapist play a fundamental role in early childhood and preschool education, providing an integral service that complements and impacts the population of the educational sector.

**Funding:** none.

**Conflicts of interest:** none.

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