EMILIA ŁAWECKA

University of Zielona Góra
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0280-6595
lawecka.emilia@wp.pl

Interpersonal Communication as a Basis for Cooperation Between Early School Education Teachers

Komunikacja interpersonalna fundamentem współpracy nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej

Abstract: The article presents the stages of the communication process between early childhood education teachers. The aim of the study is to show the impact of communication on teachers' cooperation, including describing the formation of communication networks, which are communication structures. Another goal is to describe the features of communication that prove that it, like feedback, is one of the key factors of constructive cooperation. In this work, we will focus on analyzing the role and importance of dialogue between teachers, exploring its various aspects, from the impact on interpersonal relationships to the consequences for the quality of cooperation between teachers. The final goal is to indicate the advantages of interpersonal communication.

Keywords: communication; early school education; communication network; dialogue; language competences; cooperation

Abstrakt: W artykule przybliżono etapy procesu komunikacyjnego między nauczycielami edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Celem opracowania jest pokazanie wpływu komunikacji na współpracę nauczycieli, w tym także opisanie powstawania sieci komunikacyjnych, które są strukturami komunikowania się. Kolejnym celem jest opisanie cech komunikacji, które dowodzą, że jest ona, podobnie jak informacja zwrotna, jednym z kluczowych czynników konstruktywnej współpracy. W niniejszej pracy skupimy się na analizie roli i znaczenia dialogu między nauczycielami, zgłębiając jego różnorodne aspekty, od wpływu na relacje interpersonalne po konsekwencje dla jakości współpracy między nauczycielami. Ostatnim celem jest wskazanie zalet, jakie za sobą niesie komunikacja interpersonalna.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja między nauczycielami; edukacja wczesnoszkolna; sieć komunikacyjna; dialog; kompetencje językowe; współpraca

INTRODUCTION

The term "communication" comes from the Latin verb *communico*, *communicare* (to make common, to connect; to share, to consult) and the noun *communio* (community). Interpersonal communication "should be understood as the exchange of information between a sender and a receiver, where the exchange takes place through a channel. It is assumed that the exchanged information will influence the recipient's actions. The channel of exchange is the means of communication and must be appropriately adapted to the needs of both the sender and receiver" (Okoń, 2001, p. 177).

One of the first definitions of communication in scientific literature was given by Cooley (1992, p. 44), who defined "communication as the basic mechanism of human existence and development. He described this process as the transfer of symbols between human individuals, extended in space and lasting over time". He also pointed out the connection between the exchange of information and the participant's facial expressions, posture, gestures, tone of voice, and the mode of exchange – whether it is oral or written. A similar definition says that communication is "the process of exchanging information, carried out orally or in writing, using symbols and body language" (1992, p. 44).

Interpersonal communication is a complex process of exchanging information that occurs in the context of direct interactions between individuals. The literature highlights several key theories that can serve as theoretical foundations for analyzing the role of communication in the collaboration of early childhood education teachers. One such theory is social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which focuses on how individuals make decisions about interpersonal interactions based on expectations of benefits and costs. From the perspective of early childhood education teachers, effective communication can be seen as a form of investment that contributes to better collaboration and the achievement of common educational goals. Collaboration between teachers can provide benefits such as professional support, problem-solving, and the exchange of experiences, which can increase job satisfaction and effectiveness.

Biddle (1986, pp. 67–92) presents the theory of social roles, which assumes that individuals take on different roles depending on the context and social expectations. The same applies to early childhood education, where teachers assume various roles, such as mentors, team leaders, or conflict mediators. Effective interpersonal communication allows teachers to better manage their roles, adjusting their behavior and communication strategies to the needs and expectations of colleagues and students. On the other hand, intercultural communication theory (Hall, 1976) highlights the differences in communication styles resulting from cultural and individual diversity. In the context of teacher collaboration, where individuals may come from different cultural backgrounds or have different communication styles, understanding and adapting to these differences becomes crucial. The ability to adapt communication to diverse perspectives and styles is essential for effective collaboration and resolving potential tensions.

It is important to emphasize that effective interpersonal communication in the work of early childhood education teachers requires the development of at least three skills. The first is active listening. This is a process in which the individual not only receives verbal and non-verbal signals from the speaker but also engages in understanding their perspective and emotions (Carl Rogers, 1951). In the context of teacher collaboration, active listening can help better understand the needs and opinions of colleagues, which promotes effective problem-solving and trust-building. Furthermore, verbal communication (words and speech structure) and non-verbal communication (gestures, facial expressions, body posture) are equally important in creating effective interactions (Mehrabian, 1971). Teachers should be aware of how their way of speaking and non-verbal signals may affect how others receive their messages. Harmoniously combining these two aspects of communication promotes better collaboration and understanding.

As a result, conflict resolution is a crucial aspect of effective interpersonal communication. Negotiation and mediation theory (Fisher et al., 1991) suggests that focusing on interests rather than just positions and seeking common solutions can help achieve agreement in conflict situations. For early childhood education teachers, this skill is essential for maintaining harmonious cooperation and creating a positive work environment. Quoting Kamińska (2019, p. 97), "creating a common ground of mutual understanding and educational agreement based on mutual influence and personal relationships becomes a certain foundation of cooperation as an important aspect of the school's organizational culture". Communication in this regard is the main element of proper cooperation between teachers. If the communication process is ineffective or disrupted at any stage, it is difficult to talk about cooperation or partnership.

DIALOGUE AS A CENTRAL MECHANISM OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND SUPPORTING COOPERATION AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TEACHERS

Understanding the theoretical foundations of interpersonal communication, such as social exchange theory, social role theory, and intercultural communication theory, is a crucial step in analyzing the collaboration of early childhood education teachers. These theories provide tools for understanding how human interactions are shaped by expectations, social roles, and cultural differences. In practical terms, a key element of effective communication in the educational environment is dialogue, which serves as the central mechanism for information exchange and supporting cooperation.

Dialogue, unlike one-sided communication, is based on mutual engagement of participants, active listening, and constructive exchange of opinions. It is a process that not only allows the transfer of information but also facilitates building a shared understanding and achieving consensus. For early childhood education teachers, ef-

fective dialogue can contribute to better understanding of the needs and perspectives of colleagues, which in turn helps create a positive work environment and improves the quality of education.

Clarity of thought expression is crucial in dialogue between teachers. Precise expression of ideas and opinions fosters understanding and eliminates potential misunderstandings, which is especially important when jointly planning educational activities.

Magda-Adamowicz (2016) observed that the ability to establish a foundation for dialogue strengthens a teacher's authority in the eyes of their audience, including other teachers. As the author pointed out, these are skills that are difficult to develop. Teachers must remember to use common terminology when communicating with other teachers, which facilitates mutual understanding and planning of actions. Knowledge of specific pedagogical terms is key to precise communication in a professional setting. Moreover, a competent teacher not only communicates effectively with other teachers but also supports their professional development. Sharing experiences, providing constructive feedback, and inspiring the exchange of ideas foster the development of the teaching community as a whole.

One form of communication that plays a critical role in all areas of human life, and takes on even greater significance in education, is dialogue. In the teaching environment, dialogue becomes not only a tool for sharing ideas and experiences but also a key element promoting professional growth and improving didactic processes. It is important to note that dialogue between teachers is not limited to the exchange of information or lesson planning. It is a dynamic process that enables reflection on one's own practice, community building, and supporting mutual professional development. Dialogue takes various forms, from informal conversations to structured meetings of teaching teams. It becomes the primary means of maintaining and managing direct relationships between participants. As Andrzejewski (1990, p. 70) writes, "it is an ongoing series of responses by at least two speaking (or writing) entities, who remain in a direct sender-receiver context".

IN THE COMMUNICATION NETWORK…

Communication influences processes such as teacher integration, coordination of activities, effective problem-solving and decision-making, information dissemination, and professional development. As Stoner and Wankel (1994, p. 446) state, contacts do not need to be formalized for a school and its teachers to function efficiently and effectively. For this purpose, communication networks are created, which are communication structures.

> Some networks may be rigid, discouraging employees from talking to anyone other than their
> supervisor. However, the authors emphasize that there are also loose networks, where every

> employee is encouraged to communicate with others at all levels. These should be used in situations where a free flow of information is necessary, for example, in education, planning, and forecasting changes. In other words, every school needs a communication system that determines who, why, and with whom must communicate. (Stoner & Wankel, 1994)

It is worth noting that the specialized literature distinguishes two types of systems encompassing information flow: formal and informal systems (Maliszewski, 2010, p. 271). A formal information flow system is defined as a method of managing information that operates according to a set of established rules. On the other hand, an informal information flow system is established spontaneously and used in everyday contacts. Unlike the formal system, this one is unregulated and occasional, developing freely in various directions. It is defined by the structure and type of group (Maliszewski, 2010).

Stankiewicz (1999, pp. 14–15) attributes certain characteristics to communication within institutions. Firstly, communication is "a specific social process because it involves at least two educational entities and always takes place in the school's social environment. Moreover, it occurs in a specific social context, determined by the number and type of participants in the process – the number and functions performed by participants in the school. This can include an interpersonal context". It is a developmental process based on generating new ideas and gaining knowledge about the surrounding world and reality, which is an intentional aspect of the school's functioning. Communication is dynamic because it relies on receiving, understanding, and processing information – each member of the school community receives instructions, tasks, and other communications that guide their actions (Wolska-Zogata, 2018, p. 85). Communication is a symbolic process because it uses symbols and signs. To achieve understanding between participants in the educational process, it is essential to have a shared semiotic community, meaning the use of the same symbols and signs. A school is an organization where symbols play many roles – titles, academic and professional degrees, positions, and hierarchy within the school – which means that symbols can become a source of conflict. Additionally, communication is an interactive process (Wolska-Zogata, 2018). Certain types of relationships are formed, including partnerships (this is symmetrical communication) or relationships based on dominance and submission (this is asymmetrical or complementary communication). This applies not only to communication between a teacher and the principal, where the hierarchy is clearly visible, but it can also occur in communication between early childhood education teachers when one participant dominates based on factors such as years of experience, knowledge, or competence.

Another characteristic of communication is that it is intentional and purposeful, as every human action has some motivation. This introduces certain risks, as communication is an irreversible process. It cannot be undone, repeated, or changed (Wolska-Zogata, 2018).

In the article "(Un)common Communication in Children's Education", Professor Magda-Adamowicz defines communication as an action involving the sharing of information and understanding the thoughts of another person. This allows one to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Thus, it is a form of power, "which connects, builds community through language and symbols, and enables the processing of social situations using symbols. It is based on the exchange of meanings between people and the expression of group norms, fulfilling social control, assigning roles, and coordinating efforts. It also includes functions related to meeting human needs" (Magda-Adamowicz, 2019).

However, Maliszewski (2010) points out that in schools, there is both horizontal and vertical information flow. Horizontal communication involves the transmission of messages from top to bottom, i.e. from the administration, and from bottom to top. Top-down communication is based, among other things, on advising, informing, and evaluating group members. Bottom-up communication involves explaining, informing, asking for help, and reporting progress.

Horizontal communication occurs between teachers at the same level and positions. It facilitates collaboration, provides direct access to information, and enables better understanding at all levels. It helps build stronger bonds between teachers. The most popular form of this model is teacher teams.

DISCUSSION

Communication between early childhood education teachers is the foundation of the educational and teaching process. In this context, building strong relationships between teachers, sharing knowledge and experience, and open communication become the source of effective collaboration.

As Kamińska (2019) writes, communication and the exchange of feedback should be recognized as key factors in constructive cooperation. Since

> listening to each other and delivering clear messages, free from biases and stereotypes, as well as adhering to the rules established by all group members, create an atmosphere of understanding and a sense of unity with the group and its goals. According to Jürgen Habermas's (1984) communication theory, people's communication competencies and actions must lead to understanding and agreement, and their main goal must be to set objectives, values, norms, rules, and to renew and develop knowledge. The structure and quality of communication, according to Habermas, determine the quality of the learning process and the ways knowledge is developed; the form of relationships between people and the sense of belonging to a community; the form of personal autonomy and the ability to express one's individuality, which together define a person's capacity to make moral judgments. (Kamińska, 2019, p. 96)

Early childhood education teachers shape students' basic attitudes towards education and develop their social and emotional skills. In this field, which concerns the youngest participants in the educational process, cooperation between teachers takes on special importance. Communication becomes a tool for understanding each student's individual needs and for adapting teaching methods to meet those needs. Teacher collaboration begins with open and systematic sharing of information about students. Teachers must share their observations regarding students' skills, abilities, and, if necessary, challenges. Joint analysis of progress allows for the adjustment of teaching methods to meet each student's individual needs, promoting better understanding and supporting their development.

Additionally, the joint identification and resolution of problems are key elements of teacher collaboration. Through proper communication, early childhood education teachers can share strategies for solving educational problems, methods for motivating students, and ways to manage differences within the group. Collaborative work also facilitates identifying students who need extra support and enables the coordination of efforts to provide them with appropriate help. Teachers can collectively develop intervention strategies that are more effective in providing educational and emotional support.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the theoretical foundations of interpersonal communication in the context of early childhood education teacher collaboration highlights the crucial role that effective communication plays in building efficient teams and supporting the educational process. Social exchange theory, social role theory, and intercultural communication theory provide valuable insights into the dynamics of human interactions, which are essential in the work of teachers.

Social exchange theory emphasizes that teachers engage in interactions and cooperation based on mutual expectations of benefits and costs. In early childhood education, this means that effective communication can lead to better coordination of activities, greater job satisfaction, and more fruitful collaboration. Facilitating this exchange through open and transparent communication is key to creating a harmonious educational environment.

Social role theory points to the importance of adapting to different roles and social expectations. For teachers, this means the necessity of being flexible in communication and understanding the roles they play in various contexts – both in relationships with students and colleagues. Additionally, effective communication allows teachers to better manage their roles and adjust their actions to meet the needs of other team members.

Understanding and adapting to communication diversity, as suggested by intercultural communication theory, are crucial in the work of teachers who may come from different cultural backgrounds or have different communication styles. The ability to

adjust to these differences contributes to more harmonious collaboration and more effective conflict resolution.

Dialogue, as the central mechanism of information exchange, plays a key role in improving teacher collaboration. Effective dialogue fosters a better understanding of colleagues' needs and perspectives, enables constructive problem-solving, and builds trust. Skills such as active listening, clear expression of thoughts, and conflict resolution are essential for conducting effective dialogue and supporting cooperation.

These findings suggest that understanding the theoretical foundations of interpersonal communication is fundamental to improving collaboration in early childhood education. The implementation of effective communication strategies, with a focus on dialogue and interpersonal skills, can significantly enhance teacher collaboration and impact the quality of the educational process. In the long term, investing in the development of teachers' communication skills can lead to a more collaborative and productive work environment, which will benefit not only students but the entire school community.

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