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The Role of Interpersonal Communication Style in the Teacher–Student Relationship

Rola stylu komunikacji interpersonalnej w relacji nauczyciel–uczeń

Summary: Communication skills are mentioned in pedagogical literature more and more often. In the contemporary school, the teacher is expected not only to transfer knowledge, but also to support and advise the student in finding the best solutions; they are also expected to be flexible and ready to stimulate the student's initiative and to shape their independence and creativity. Many scientists have been thinking for a long time about what it is that has the greatest impact on the results achieved by students in the teaching process, and what characteristics and skills should the teacher have to make them do their best work.

In connection with the above, the study attempted to determine whether or not (and to what extent) the teacher's communication affects the assessment of the quality of student-teacher relations, the anxiety felt by the student in the relationship with the teacher, and whether the manner of communication

conducted by the teacher affects the assessment of students' own competences.

The study involved 144 students in grades 6-8. The obtained results show that the teacher's effort to use nondirective ways of communication has enormous potential and can pay off in both the broadly understood individual development of the student and in the strengthening of bonds and development of social competences within the structure formed by the class team.

Streszczenie: O umiejętności komunikowania coraz częściej wspomina się w literaturze pedagogicznej. We współczesnej szkole od nauczyciela oczekuje się nie tylko umiejętności przekazywania wiedzy, ale też wspierania i doradzania uczniowi w poszukiwaniu najlepszych rozwiązań; oczekuje się także tego, aby był elastyczny i gotowy do pobudzania inicjatywy ucznia, oraz by kształtował jego samodzielność i kreatywność. Wielu naukowców nie od dziś zastanawia się nad tym, co tak naprawdę ma największy wpływ na wyniki osiągane przez uczniów w procesie nauczania oraz jakimi cechami i umiejętnościami powinien charakteryzować się nauczyciel, aby jak najlepiej wykonywał swoją pracę.

W związku z powyższym w przeprowadzonych badaniach próbowano ustalić, czy i w jakim stopniu sposób komunikacji nauczyciela wpływa na ocenę jakości relacji uczeń–nauczyciel, na lęk odczuwany przez ucznia w relacji z nauczycielem oraz czy sposób prowadzonej przez nauczyciela komunikacji wpływa na ocenę własnych kompetencji uczniów.

Badaniem objęto 144 uczniów klas 6–8. Uzyskane wyniki pozwalają stwierdzić, że podjęty przez nauczyciela trud stosowania niedyrektywnych sposobów komunikowania się niesie za sobą ogromny potencjał, który ma szansę zaprocentować zarówno w szeroko pojętym rozwoju indywidualnym ucznia, jak i pozytywnym zacieśnianiu więzi i rozwoju społecznych kompetencji wewnątrz struktury, którą tworzy zespół klasowy.

Introduction

According to many educators and psychologists, interpersonal relations between teachers and students are among the most important social interactions. Teachers are responsible for what is happening in the classroom. They determine the character of mutual relations with their students and set the tone of their meetings with the young people. It is the teacher, treated as a conduit for information, who becomes one of the main (if not the main) tools in shaping desired traits in students. In a modern school, the teacher is expected to be able to not only transfer knowledge, but also to positively influence the student, as well as support and advise them in finding the best solutions. The teacher is also expected to be flexible, ready to stimulate the child's initiative and prepared to shape their independence and creativity.

In the teaching-learning process, social communication – including interpersonal – is important (Kojs, 2001; Nęcki, 2000; Okoń, 2003; Stufa, 2008; Sztejnberg, 2006). It is defined as a process which takes place between people, the purpose of which is to convey information or change the behavior of a person or group of people. Thanks to it, we create, receive and interpret messages from other people, and we respond to them in a specific way. During interpersonal communication, each party sends messages (emits signals) and receives them (perceives the signals and pieces together the message contained in them). This also occurs in the teacher-student relationship, which is why communication between them is an inseparable element of school teaching.

In the pedagogical literature (Nowicka, 1999; 2012; Klus-Stańska & Nowicka, 2005), the following features of school communication implemented during the lesson are discussed:
- it is individual and forms into series: teacher-student, teacher-students, student-student;
- it is group communication, which takes the form of a series of questions and answers formulated on a single topic; however, it should be emphasized that "the teacher does not give the floor to students fairly" (Nowicka, 1999, p. 22);
- it is oral or written in form, implemented as communication activity during the lesson;
- it is verbal and non-verbal (uses non-verbal elements accompanying or preceding statements);

– it is asymmetrical and manifests itself in the form of teachers' questions and the concurrent lack of questions from students. In practice, it means transforming a dialogue into the teacher's monologue, during which the student finds out that "nobody is interested in what they really think" (Rittel, 1994, pp. 56–57). This asymmetry is also manifested in the fact that students are not able to formulate longer statements, and their questions relate to obtaining teacher's consent for a certain activity, their acceptance, or explanation;
– it is directive and guided by the teacher (as regards the choice of the subject of communication and the people involved in the communication process);
– it is mostly a monologue;
– it is limited by the specific arrangement of space (the traditional arrangement of school benches channels the communication activity of the student to and from the teacher, making it vertical and public: each statement requires the attention of everybody present. Students "should be able to establish conversation and continue it as intended by the teacher" (after: Kuszak, 2013).

Evidently, therefore, the teacher in the current education system is still characterized by their central position and directiveness. This tool of discipline is used to assess the students' work and behavior, which has a negative impact on shaping their attitudes, and teaches them absolute obedience and uncritical acceptance of the teacher's statements. As a result, the students' passivity is reinforced, limiting their curiosity and openness to asking developing questions. Consequently, what appears desirable in the realities of the modern school is

> educating and equipping teachers with new and varied competences; in the context of content – it should be more general than highly specialized, more open than closed, more creative than imitative, and in the context of the nature of the teacher's professional role – they should depart from the role of communicator and executor to one of guide and translator. (Kwieciński, 2011, p. 7)

In respect of these comments, one should ponder what can improve the teaching process. One of the many factors influencing the effectiveness of education is didactic communication skills. The role of strong communication competences of teachers, and the need to improve them, has been highlighted, among others, by Wacław Strykowski, Czesław Kupisiewicz, Wojciech

Kojs and Aleksander Sztejnberg (Kojs, 2001; Kupisiewicz, 2005; Strykowski, Strykowska & Pielachowski, 2003; Sztejnberg, 2002). According to these authors, the quality of the educational process depends on the teacher and, to a large extent, on their communication competences. These researchers believe that every teacher should develop their communication skills to be able to effectively teach and educate students. Since the implementation of many didactic and educational tasks requires the teacher to send messages in a way that allows their proper interpretation by the student, it is extremely important to choose the right language, adequate to the situation and to the students as recipients. The teacher should, therefore, express their own thoughts in a clear, simple, direct, as well as interesting, way. Proper communication is therapeutic, creates a good atmosphere in the classroom and transforms the teacher into a mentor and partner for their students. Satisfying pupils' psychological needs (respect, belonging, self-development) is as important as their intellectual development. Mieczysław Łobocki (2007) emphasizes that the effectiveness of the teacher-student dialogue lies in adjusting it to the age, intellectual level and interests of the interlocutor (or even their well-being on a given day). Teachers' statements should be short and clear, and should give the recipient – the student – the opportunity to express their opinion.

Non-verbal messages, such as gestures, facial expressions, touch, eye contact, physical distance and body position, are important elements of teacher-student communication, too. Research results, including those of Thomas Gordon (1999), Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska (1999) and Beata Sufy (2008), unequivo-cally prove that it is desirable for the student that the teacher be smiling and have a cheerful expression. These elements of non-verbal communication lead to better learning results and allow for a more pleasant classroom atmosphere. The positive personality traits of teachers which are reflected in their ability to communicate with students are a condition for achieving such results. The teacher can positively influence the school environment and contribute to their students' educational success by developing personality traits that affect the way they communicate with others. Table 1 shows attributes that are positive and desirable for teachers.

Table 1

Teachers' positive personality traits affecting students' educational success

Cognitive features	intelligence, interest, imagination, verbal fluency
Pedagogical skills	way of transferring knowledge, organizational skills, the ability to listen attentively
Character traits	justice in judgment, kindness towards students, patience, empathy
Behavioral traits	ease in making contact with young people, the ability to control their own emotional states
Resistance to stress	stability of behavior
A cheerful disposition and an optimistic attitude	modeling behaviors and attitudes which indirectly affect students' attitudes towards themselves and their duties

Source: Obuchowska, 1996, pp. 132–133.

Analyzing the scientific achievements of recent years devoted to communication in education (cf. Mądry-Kupiec, 2011; Okrasa, Maliszewski & Fieder, 2015; Putkiewicz, 1990; Sztejnberg, 2002; 2006), it is possible to distinguish many communication styles used by teachers during lessons which influence the teacher-student relationship. They depend, among others, on the level of the teacher's education, personality, temperament and involvement in performing their professional activities. Numerous publications referring to the characteristics of teachers distinguish the following styles of teacher-student communication:

- authoritarian – a one-way communication style. The teacher plays the role of group leader and manager, and hates objections. Such teachers impose their own model of interaction with the students. This style of communication is characterized by the lack of feedback from students. The lesson is usually conducted using the lecture method;
- cooperative – a communication style that is two-sided. Both the student and teacher can act as senders and recipients of messages. The teacher accepts the views and opinions of the student, actively listens and confirms that they understand the student's statements;
- lenient – focused on the freedom and rights of students. During class, students enjoy a great deal of freedom in both horizontal and vertical communication. The purpose of this way of communication is to develop student independence by enabling them to make decisions;

- behavior modification – is based on forced control of students' behavior in the classroom. It places great emphasis on the use of rewards and penalties for behaviors consistent or inconsistent with the teacher's expectations.

Analyzing the cited examples of communication styles in education, it should be stated that each of them has its own advantages and disadvantages. The authoritarian style of communication is referred to as one-sided, which means that the teacher plays a dominant role in the process and expects students to mainly listen and receive what he or she communicates. There is no place for feedback and questions. Students cannot express their opinions or influence their school reality. Most often, this style of communication causes an unpleasant emotional atmosphere in the classroom. Pupils do not want to engage in tasks but feel external coercion and fear of the teacher. They have no desire to identify with the school they most often have negative feelings about. Similarly to behavior modification, which uses not only rewards but also punishments, the authoritarian style makes students feel pressure and imposes a fear of consequences and failure. Conversely, the cooperative, behavior modification and lenient styles are methods of communication in which the process of the mutual exchange of messages, views and emotions takes place. There is both feedback and listening to feedback complementing each other. This gives students a sense of co-creation of the tasks they perform, which increases their motivation and makes them believe that what they do makes sense. In the lenient style, in an atmosphere of apparent slack, the teacher allows students to make decisions independently and create their environment, giving them much freedom and significantly reducing the distance between the teacher and the student.

Assumptions of the methodology of own research

Numerous studies (Bochno, 2004; Brzezińska, 2002; Mądry-Kupiec, 2011) characterizing the teacher-student relationship allow one to assume that proper interpersonal communication between teachers and students is not only a condition for the proper course of the teaching process, but it also facilitates the resolution of many conflicts in the classroom (on the lines student-student, student-teacher) and allows for the meeting of the psychological needs of students (including their needs for security, respect, recognition and self-fulfillment). The aim of the research was to examine which communication methods are used by educators and look at whether/to what extent the teacher's communication

affects selected aspects of students' experience (such as anxiety experienced in their relations with the teacher and the assessment of their own competences). Apart from professional expertise, interpersonal communication is a very important element of the teacher's work. Correct communication helps to achieve mutual understanding between the teacher and the student. It gives the teacher the opportunity to express themselves and, importantly, facilitates exerting influence and solving problems, and so is of great importance in the process of education. The teacher, by shaping the didactic structure and social processes in the class, has an impact on the individual development of students (Brzezińska, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, the research was conducted at a primary school in Chorzów in 2019, during weekly class meetings. It involved 144 students who were informed about the complete anonymity of the research and their voluntary participation in it. Identical instructions were given to all groups of students.

To determine how teachers communicate with pupils, a questionnaire was prepared in which students were asked to refer to 16 statements about the course of teacher-student communication based on situations well known to them from everyday school life. An example is the statement: "I feel that my teacher listens to me carefully when I speak to him/her." Children had a choice of one of the following categories of answers: "often," "sometimes" and "never." Answers were scored on a three-point Likert scale from 0 ("never") to 2 ("often"). This method aimed to identify three ways of communication between the teacher and students:

1) authoritarian;
2) mixed; and
3) nondirective.

In addition, in order to determine whether – and to what extent – the students experience anxiety in their relationships with teachers, the STAIC questionnaire (version C1 and C2) was used in the Polish adaptation by Spielberger, Sosnowski and Iwaniszczuk (2005). The STAIC questionnaire allows for the measurement of state anxiety, i.e., situation-related anxiety, and trait anxiety, understood as one's predisposition to react, as based on Spielberger's concepts. Each subscale (C1 and C2) consists of 20 questions to which the respondent responds by choosing one of four categorized answers. The results range from 20 to 80 points. The higher the score, the higher the level of state anxiety and trait anxiety.

Due to the fact that the teacher's activities (i.e., their style of communication) can affect the self-efficacy of the pupils, Zygfryd Juczyński's KompOs Personal Competence Scale (2012) was used to study this feature in students. The KompOs Personal Competence Scale allows one to measure the generalized sense of self-efficacy and its two components: strength – necessary to initiate action, and perseverance – necessary to continue it. It consists of two scales: A (strength) and B (perseverance), each containing six statements. The overall score is between 12 and 48 points. The higher the score, the higher the sense of self-efficacy.

In addition, a survey was carried out among the students which was used to collect basic information about them regarding personal data (name, age, gender), demographics (school, class, place of residence, number of siblings, people living with the child) and the assessment of the teacher's communication methods.

The participants of the study included 144 students from grades 6–8 of a primary school in Chorzów. The breakdown of the respondents according to age and gender is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Age and gender of the respondents

Age (in years)	Girls		Boys	
	n	%	n	%
11	14	9.72	10	6.93
12	20	13.94	14	9.72
13	22	15.30	23	15.96
14	12	8.33	20	13.94
15	3	2.01	6	4.15
Jointly	71	49.30	73	50.70

Source: own research.

The majority of students came from full families (104, or 72.2%), 12 from incomplete families (8.3%) and 28 from reconstructed families (19.4%).

Analysis of own research results

The analysis of the empirical data began with the calculation of descriptive statistics for individual variables. The average level of state anxiety in the study group was M = 42.6; SD = 1.23, and was close to the result in the standardization test. In the studied group of students, the source of anxiety felt at school was teacher-student interaction. In fact, as many as 55% of respondents indicated the way the student was treated as one of the causes of school anxiety. The students particularly emphasized such problems as the lack of understanding, lack of partnership, the role of "judge and executioner" played by the teacher, verbal oppression, unfair assessment and motivation by intimidation.

Next, the ways of teacher-student communication were analyzed. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Teacher-student communication styles

Teacher's communication style	Numer of people	
	n	%
Autoritarian	23	15.90
Cooperative	47	32.60
Lenient	18	12.50
Behavior modification	56	38.99

Source: own research.

Table 3 shows that in the study group, the most indications were given to the communication style based on behavior modification, because the teachers task is still mostly to educate the student. At the same time, however, a large group of respondents assessed the teacher as using the cooperative model of communication. A nondirective attitude, consisting in presenting proposals for solutions, rather than indicating and imposing them, is the first step towards treating the student as a partner in dialogue.

Analyzing the cited examples of communication styles in education, it should be stated that the most compatible with today's model of open education is the cooperative style. Communication in this case is smooth; both the teacher and the student actively participate in it. The teacher's attitude

towards the student is balanced and based on mutual understanding and acceptance. The teacher then becomes an authority and a model, as well as a person the pupil can turn to in case of problems.

The surveyed students also indicated the sort of messages of "non-acceptance" they experience in contact with the teacher. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Types of "non-acceptance" messages sent by the teacher*

Type of non-acceptance messages	Number of people	
	n	%
Judging	80	55.55
Insulting	23	15.97
Commanding	77	53.47
Threatening	11	7.63
Moralizing	98	68.05
Excessive questioning	4	2.77
Other	21	14.58

* The results do not add up because participants had the option to choose multiple responses.
Source: own research.

The respondents indicated that such behaviors of teacher-tutors as moralizing, judging and commanding threaten the freedom of the relation and make them reluctant to ask the adult for help or advice. These behaviors evoke a lot of negative emotions among students, such as rebellion, anger, resentment and bitterness, which contribute to increasing the distance in their relations with the teacher. As a result, they do not want to cooperate, they rebel more often, they do not like their teachers and negate the knowledge they transfer. At the same time, this translates into a lower mood of the adolescents, because if they are constantly rebuked, they come to the conclusion that there is no need to talk, and thus their self-esteem decreases.

Table 5
Types of "acceptance" messages sent by the teacher*

Type of acceptance messages	Number of people	
	n	%
Treats with respect	66	45.83
Does not judge	46	31.94
Listens to what I have to say	74	51.38
Speaks directly	38	26.38
Does not command	64	44.45
Is able to praise	56	38.88
Other	17	11.80

* The results do not add up because participants had the option to choose multiple responses.
Source: own research.

The surveyed students declared that teachers' behaviors such as active listening and treating the pupils with respect, instead of ordering and judging them, make them willing to share problems with the teacher, and instigate the need to contact them. The respondents also said that acceptance messages have a very good impact on the classroom atmosphere as they reduce competition, especially if the teacher treats all students in the same way. In this relationship, students do not feel anxious, they are able to cooperate with the educator, to express their own ideas more often; they are not afraid to take action and they learn that relationships with adults can be cordial and safe.

These results confirm the research conducted by, among others, Ronald Edmonds (1986), who showed that teacher support is one of the determinants of student attendance and the extent to which they fulfill their school duties. Edmonds' research also showed a relationship between a sense of belonging (manifested in the sense of acceptance, support and respect from peers, teachers and other adults belonging to the school community) felt by students, the motivation to learn, school results, school behavior patterns and behavior patterns outside of school.

The next step in the study was to analyze the correlation between the teacher's communication style and such variables as the students' sense of personal competence, the level of state anxiety and the level of trait anxiety. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Communication style and studied variables

Communication style	Sense of personal competence	State anxiety	Trait anxiety
Authoritarian	0.021	0.371**	0.228*
Cooperative	0.291**	-0.261**	0.112
Lenient	0.222*	0.117	0.147
Behavior modification	0.153	-0.145*	0.111

* p < 0.05
** p < 0.001
Source: own research.

Significant correlations were observed between low strength variables and moderate strength ones. The strongest relationship concerned the correlation between the authoritarian method of communication and the level of students' state anxiety, as well as the relationship between the low level of anxiety and the cooperative method of communication with the students. The relationship between the cooperative style of communication and the student's sense of personal competence was also significant.

Therefore, it should be recognized that the more often the teacher's authoritative style of communication occurs, the more often the student reacts to them and their school situation with anxiety. This may have a negative impact on the student's school achievements, as well as may be a reason for their reluctance towards school or the occurrence of various negative psychological symptoms, e.g., somatization or depressed mood.

An inverse relationship occurs between the collaborative style of teacher communication and the low level of anxiety experienced by the student in this relationship. This style determines greater openness and mutual trust in relationships, which undoubtedly has a positive effect on the student's education and upbringing process and, therefore, on obtaining higher personal competences, such as creativity, conflict resolution skills and stress management. The reason why developing the collaborative style of communication is difficult is that it is much easier to give instructions than to motivate someone to act. At the same time, as research shows, the collaborative pattern of teacher-student communication is much better than the authoritarian one because it makes students feel less fear and experience a greater sense of self-efficacy. Because the process of communicating in the collaborative style is based on emotional

warmth, adolescents are well-disposed to the class, and in return the teacher can feel that their work is effective.

Conclusion

In the light of the obtained research results, it can be stated that a teacher's effort to develop effective communication with the student has enormous potential and can pay off in the broadly understood individual development of the student, in the correct implementation of the intended educational and educational goals, as well as in strengthening bonds and developing competence within the structure of a class team. The results of the conducted research indicate that a teacher's non-directive attitude in contact with the student – the co-operative and behavior modification styles of communication (i.e., such ways of teacher-student conversation that consist in presenting proposals for solutions, not indicating and imposing them) – is extremely important in the teacher-student relationship. It is, in fact, the first step towards minimizing the level of students' anxiety in school situations, towards treating the student as an equal partner in dialogue and helping them to develop personal competences.

Conversely, teachers who behave in the authoritarian manner – fake a dialogue, interact with persuasion, orders or threats – establish relationships with students in a completely different way. These teachers reinforce the level of anxiety in students, thus discouraging them from presenting their own opinions, independence and creativity. Students do not treat such teachers as conversation partners because they are afraid of them not accepting their feelings, views and opinions. In a situation where the level of anxiety prevails over the level of trust in the class, it is not possible to conduct an effective dialogue aimed at solving difficult problems and thus, eliminating threats leading to educational crises (e.g., school phobia, peer aggression and pathologies in behavior).

In the context of the above information, it is very important to make educators aware of the extremely important role of appropriate teacher behavior – building an atmosphere of mutual trust in the classroom – which behavior can be a constructive method of helping students overcome school anxiety, build their own effectiveness and autonomy. The most important goal of education that teachers should strive to achieve is to develop a model of communication in which they will talk to students, not instruct them; cooperate, not give orders; suggest, not explicitly say how to do the task. Only a teacher well prepared in terms of communication skills can create proper conditions

for the development of pupils in the class, making the student feel like an unconditionally accepted person, treated with due respect. Proper interpersonal communication between teachers and students is not only a condition for the proper course of the teaching process, it also allows the teacher to solve many conflicts in the classroom. In addition, it is necessary in the process of satisfying the psychosocial needs of the student (the need for security, emotional communication with others, respect, recognition and self-fulfillment).

Meeting these needs is as important as the intellectual development of students. Proper communication is therapeutic, creates a good atmosphere in the classroom and transforms the teacher into a guide and partner. Acquiring proper communication skills by teachers will undoubtedly contribute to improving the quality of teaching-learning in every modern Polish school and will give children the opportunity to increase the number of people they will be able to turn to in case of problems. All this will translate into better education and educational results.

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