

Communication

In the world of the school, open and clear communication is of the utmost importance; for the teacher, the parents and the child. School and parents need to work together with each other for successful education. Furthermore, personal contact between teachers and parents is important as it contributes to the creation of a positive school culture.

This chapter will first describe the communication process, then the competencies a teacher needs to communicate in a professional way with children and parents is touched upon. Next, the communication with children is discussed and the last part is concerned with communication with parents.

1. The process of communication

Constructive communication is vital when teachers, parents and children want to work together in a cooperative manner (Bolks, 2011). In the cooperation between school and parents (children) messages are constantly transferred and received. There is always an interaction between two or more persons, in this case between a teacher and (a) parent (child). Communication is influenced by many factors;

- by the relationship of the participants
- by the mood of the participants
- by the particular person who is speaking
- by the time of the day.

It involves a direct interaction between people, where fast feedback is possible. The receiver sends a message back, the transmitter is the recipient, and then responds, and so on. Sometimes the teacher is transmitter, other times the parent (child). The different aspects of the communication process are shown in Figure 1.1.

The model highlights the complexity of the process.

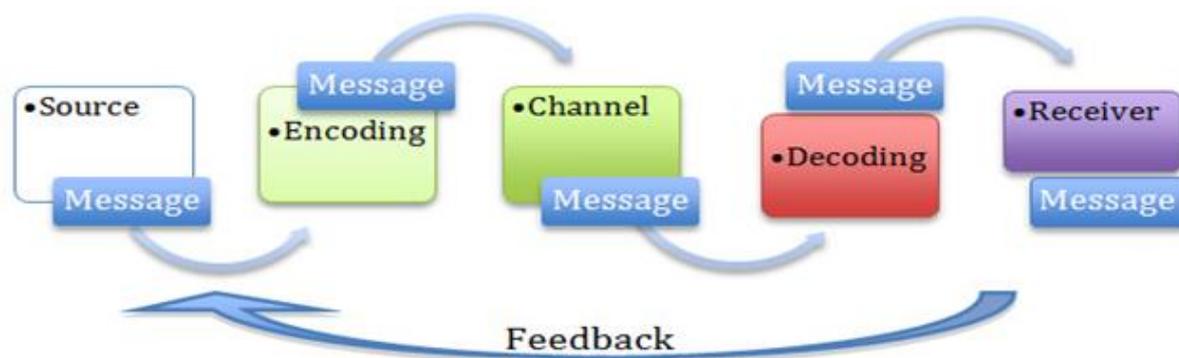


Figure 1.1: The communication process source: www.bayridgecounsellingcentres.ca

1.1. How does a teacher ensure constructive communication?

She¹ needs to be aware of her reaction in all kind of situations, but especially in situations that involves parents and children. American psychologist Timothy Leary observed interactions between people and he discovered all kinds of patterns. He developed a rose, "Leary's Rose" (Figure 1.2). This model can be used to make professionals more aware of their attitudes and communication styles when negotiating and provide them with a tool to improve communication by modifying their natural responses. (Susilo et al, 2013). The assumption behind this tool is that the default reaction we intuitively choose is not always the most effective. Becoming aware of this default reaction makes it possible to choose to behave differently, in a more effective way. This model can be used in all kind of interactions and ways of communication. Using this model it is always possible to determine where a teacher is exactly in relation to the parent or child.



Figure 1.2: Leary's Rose Source: <http://www.go4it-po.nl/joomla/de-producten/persoonlijkheidstesten/de-roos-van-leary/21-de-roos-van-leary>

The behaviour characterized by power is shown in the upper half of the circle, whereas the lower half represents powerlessness or frustration. On the horizontal axis, the right side relates to affinity and sympathy, while the left side is characterised by behaviour lacking affinity and sympathy.

The model contains 8 segments. Clockwise they are the following:

1. Above-Together (AT): power and cooperation (leading). This is sympathetic leadership with charisma.

¹ She can also be a he.

2. Together-Above (TA): cooperation and power (helping). This is the informal leadership, with a lot of care for participation.
3. Together-Below (TB): cooperation and weakness / incapability. This is the real team- sure together that the job is done.
4. Below-Together (BT): helplessness and cooperation (dependent). This is the behaviour of following instructions and being constructive.
5. Below-Against (BA): helplessness and obstructionism (distrust). This is wait-and-see, with- drawn and apathetic behaviour.
6. Against-Below (AB): obstructionism and helplessness (insurrectional). This is behaviour characterised by dissatisfaction, resistance and opposition.
7. Against-Above (AgA): obstructionism and power (aggressive). This is aggressive and overpowering behaviour.
8. Above-Against (AAg): power and obstructionism (competitive). This is leading, business-like and confident behaviour, but lacks the sympathetic side of AT

A good interlocutor will be able to recognise this process and may use several of the segments during conversation. Whereas people may prefer certain segments of the circle it is not a personality typology. You may be able to predict what the behaviour of someone will be when confronted with certain behaviour:

- Together will provoke Together
- Against will provoke Against
- Above will provoke Below
- Below will provoke Above

By making use of the Rose of Leary, it is possible to influence the communication. If the teacher is stuck in communicating with a parent (or child) he can take various actions to make changes.

1.2. Emotional Intelligence

Another way to come to constructive communication is by the five components of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1996). Coleman delineates five components of "Emotional Intelligence", crucial skills by which he shows how they determine our success in relationships, work, and even our physical well-being. *"Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth."*

The five components are:

- Self-awareness. The ability to recognize and understand personal moods and emotions and drives, as well as their effect on others.
- Self-regulation. The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods, and the propensity to suspend judgment and to think before acting.
- Internal motivation. A passion to work for internal reasons that go beyond money and status -which are external rewards, - such as an inner vision of what is important in life, a joy in doing something, curiosity in learning, a flow that comes with being immersed in an activity.
- Empathy. The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people. A skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions. In an educational context, empathy is often thought to include, or lead to, sympathy, which implies concern, or care or a wish to soften negative emotions or experiences in others.
- Social skills. Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks, and an ability to find common ground and build rapport.

In figure 1.3 there is an overview of the five components of this compelling vision of human possibility to make communication and relationship insightful.

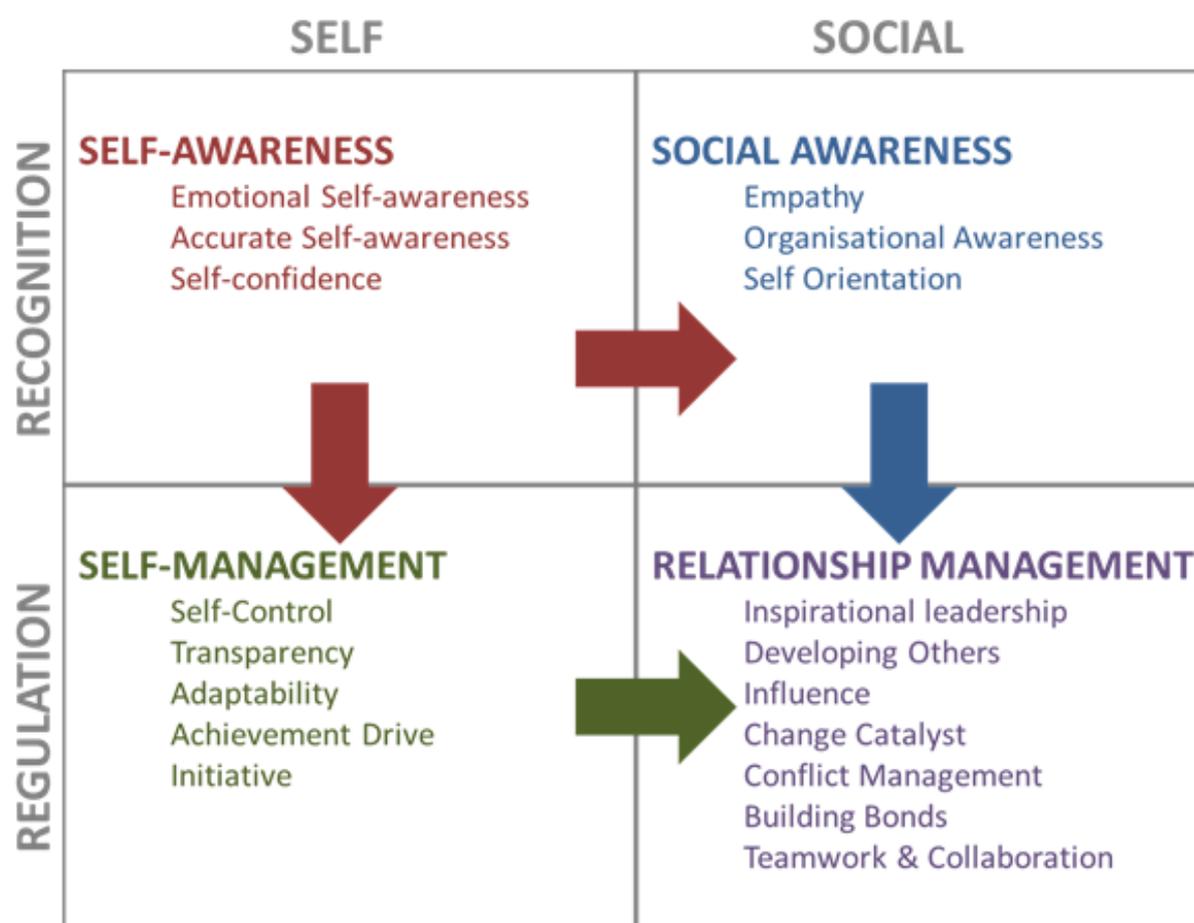


Figure 1.3: Communication and relationship Source: based on Goleman (1996)

2. The teacher and competencies

A primary school teacher has to know, and be able to do, a lot of things. Also, a certain aptitude or education is required. This aptitude, knowledge and skills lie in the field of competencies. In the interpersonal, pedagogical, professionally and organizationally field she must have certain qualities. For example, she should be able to make good contact with the children in her class and communicate in a proper way with them. Offer them a safe learning environment and be able to facilitate good intrinsic activities or lessons, in order to help children develop fully. She should be able to work in a cooperative way with peers and in the environment of the school. This competence includes communicating with parents. Reflection and development are competencies needed to express her views about her profession, which will be a continuous, developing process; she will continue to reflect and continuously develop. Working and communicating with children and parents is another important skill for teachers to develop continuously. A teacher must know where she stands, where she goes in her teaching profession, what her values, standards and educational principles are based on (Jutten, 2015).

Jutten (2015) describes eight basic skills for communication:

1. Contact for contract

If the teacher starts with a conversation, it is important that there is an atmosphere of safety and trust. She makes real contact with the other person before she moves on to the content: sets the other at ease, lets them know that she's there for them. This can be for example briefly asking "How are you?" Often, a look or a welcoming attitude is enough.

For example: You have a parent meeting. One parent comes in for an interview and she/he has come by bike is all wet with the rain. If you then start immediately talking about her son Pete and how he is currently doing at school, you do not adhere to this important principle. Make her/ him feel comfortable.

2. Authenticity

In a good conversation the teacher should acknowledge interest in the other person. She has to try to understand the other, have real interest in the other(s) and allows the other to notice it in a verbal and non-verbal way.

3. Shift in perception

In a conversation, a teacher constantly shifts her concentration. She makes a shift in her perception: sometimes she is at the other, then back to herself, at other times she steps 'in conversation' and looks at it from both points of view (thought processes during the conversation), what happens here between us? Why isn't this talk going on? How do we get out of here together? In practice, the teacher often uses this moment, in which the other is speaking, to think about what she is going to say.

4. Active listening

Listening to someone is not something passive, but an activity. It has everything to do with the swing of perceptions: are we able to stay with the other? Do we really try to understand the other? Active listening requires empathy, patience, calm, properly handle pauses in conversation. The point is to decipher the message that is conveyed, to discover its meaning and to check if that what you understood is correct without involving a judgment, opinion or recommendation to pronounce. To decipher the message correctly, prejudices and personal interpretations need to be suppressed as much as possible, however difficult that may be. Additionally, you have to look closely to the signals given. Dijk (2009) states that there are at least two channels of communication; the verbal and non-verbal channel. The non-verbal channel is everything we convey with body language – gestures, eye contact, touch, facial expression etc., - and the sound, the melody of the words. In many conversations, interviews the non-verbal communication aspect will play an important role. It must be congruent with the content of the verbal message. If it doesn't then confusion will arise at the relational level. The non-verbal signals need to correspond with the verbal signals.

Communication benefits from congruent message. Without congruence there will be confusion. Active listening helps to make a good atmosphere during the interview and also helps to discover feelings. By asking questions, the other person can analyse and solve problems by himself. The simplest and most important rule in listening is to: stop talking!

Asking questions

Asking good questions has a double meaning in an interview:

For the questioner it delivers more information, to understand the other person better, what the problem is, and how they experience things. By asking good questions, however, you not only help yourself, but also the other: he is forced to think, to reflect, to organize thoughts and feelings. Various types of questions are distinguished:

- Closed questions: here few answers are possible, e.g. 'Yes or no'.
- Open questions: these provide the interviewer and the other with the most information.
- Chain questions: ask several questions in sequence; they often arise from impatience.
- Suggestive questions: the answer is as it were 'hidden' in the question
- Choice questions: these questions must be selected from some alternatives you offer.

Open questions generate a lot. Asking open questions and then pausing for a moment, ensures so that the other person feels invited to speak. A single open question is thereby not enough, ask multiple questions and respond to what the other says. If you are unsure whether the other wants to say something, ask them and also respect any refusal to talk. Good questions often include a large part of the solution. You can also pay attention to the content of the question. Several distinct types of questions you can ask: ask for facts, ask for opinions, ask about feelings and ask about values.

5. Reluctance with solutions

In education we are used to helping others, to advise them and to solve problems (for others). In an interview we often have the tendency to give others advice and what they should do. Even without the request of the other person. In many cases this is not the most appropriate approach; the other does not feel taken seriously, or the 'solutions' are appropriate for you, but not for the other person. If you are not sure if the other would like suggestions for a solution, ask him: what do you expect in this conversation with me?

6. Various conversation interventions

The way the interview is conducted, among other things depends on the accents that are put into the interview but above all on the atmosphere. The accents are determined by the emphasis they wish to impose on the content, the process, the interaction between the people involved or the feelings of those involved. An action, which is grafted on one from the foregoing aspects, is called a conversation intervention. We distinguish the following four types of interview interventions:

1. Content intervention. This is most common intervention. Here we often remain suspended. Some examples of questions:
 - How is it going with the new approach?
 - Where are the bottlenecks?
 - I will explain to you how this could happen.
2. Procedure intervention. Something about the procedure has to be told. Some examples:
 - We now have little time. Shall we meet again and calmly talk about it?
 - Shouldn't the parents be present at this meeting?
 - Are there any other issues to be addressed?
3. Interaction intervention. Expressing what is going on between the interlocutors. Some examples:
 - You aren't saying anything? Why's that?

- I have the impression that we are talking past one another?
- 4. Feelings intervention. Feelings of the interlocutors may be expressed during the interview. Some examples:
 - I notice that you are concerned?
 - What is it that makes you so irritated?
 - I'm disappointed with your view.

An interview will effectively expire when all four possibilities of response are involved in the conversation.

3. Communication with children

The teacher provides appropriate education and thus provides a crucial contribution to the positive development of children. She is the linchpin in appropriate education. Inside the school she is the most important factor which influences the children. She can adapt to differences between pupils and teaches accordingly. She may increase the wellbeing of children in school significantly.

A strong teacher is effective for all pupils, whatever their characteristics. With an effective teacher, the school performance of its students is much more forward than with an ineffective teacher. When combining the quality of schools with the qualities of teachers Marzano (2007) observed a big difference in school performance over a period of two years. This difference is measured with points, with 50 points being the average. A student at the least effective school with the least effective teacher only improves 3 points. While a student at the most effective school with the most effective teacher improves 96 points (Marzano, 2007 in Jones & Jones 2013). The impact of a teacher is thus relevant.

Communication with children should be an integral part of the speaking opportunities of a teacher; conversations at both group and the individual level.

General.

Communication with children is an integral part of a teacher's day. In conversations with groups or with individual children, the teacher tries to get insight into how children are learning, what they have already mastered and what is needed, what strategies they use to apply and which helps them during instruction and independent (collaborate) work and play.

By conducting interviews with children and involving them actively in their own development, they learn to think critically, they experience playing and learning at school as meaningful and their well-being will increase. Many children appear to be able to identify their own educational needs well. They can indicate how they experience a difficult situation, how it is, according to them and how to solve it. It is their perception, opinion and ideas. This information is valuable for an understanding of a problem or situation, and then come up together with what might be an effective approach.

Specific.

Giving children a voice and allowing children's views will be beneficial for the teacher. They can provide valuable feedback to the teacher; what the teacher is doing well and what could she have done better? A child will be also more committed to his own idea than the idea of another (teacher). There is increased involvement because the child feels responsible and has ownership. To find out the child's thoughts and ideas a personal conversation is necessary. This requires a few things from a child; he can look at himself, can devise explanations and solutions and is motivated to do something about the situation. Children have to have, to a greater or lesser extent, these skills. Children prefer teachers who help create clear behaviour standards, use humour and calm responses when responding

to classroom disruptions, and when appropriate, allow children an opportunity to explain their side of the story (Jones & Jones, 2013).

The teacher needs to listen and respond appropriately to a personal request for a conversation from a child. It requires the teacher's verbal skills: active listening, connecting to the language level, summarizing, questioning and taking into account the needs of the child. The attitude of the teacher is also important. Warmth, patience, respect, authenticity, empathy and interest are necessary for a constructive conversation with a child.

Jones & Jones (2013) noted that empathic, non-evaluative listening involves providing the speaker with a sense that she has been clearly heard and that feelings expressed are acceptable. Glaser (1988) noted that there are three levels at which children can satisfy their need for power of involvement in the school environment. First, children simply need to believe that someone whom they respect will listen to them. At the second level, someone listens and accepts the validity of the child's statement or concerns. The third and highest level involves an adult stating that the child's idea may be worth implementing (in Jones & Jones, 2013).

Conversations between teacher and child (ren) strengthen their relationship. It may be clear that active listening is one of the most important skills a teacher needs in communication with children.

Next to listening the teacher should also match the way young children learn; which can often mean through play. Delfos (2008) says talking with children from four to six years and interviewing them should take place while playing, which combines play and talk. The teacher should try to join the activity in which the child is doing or initiating a new activity, the teacher needs to hold short conversations of ten to fifteen minutes verbally alternating with play to make the interview in total longer. The teacher should use nonverbal forms of play, stories and making phrases. They should not sit still too long, as it can create tension. Exercise and movement reduces the stress element involved.

Also Baarda (2012) says that conversations with young children are often unnatural. A child will not (often) ask for an interview. If the teacher suspects that a child has problems he should be extra alert to carry on a conversation in a fun, child-friendly and creative way. Being creative by deploying tools; drawing pictures and doing something together is to communicate in a natural way that is appropriate for young children.

The termination or completion of a conversation deserves care. At the end of a conversation, attention must be paid to questions and emotions that provoked the interview. It is intended that the child closes the conversation with a positive feeling. If this is not adhered to, it will seem as if the talk is not finished (Delfos, 2008).

4. Communication with parents

The importance of good communication with parents is because of the fact that school and parents are inseparable. They belong together; a school cannot live without parents and parents not without a school. Parents and school "work" both with children and have a common interest: to create optimal conditions for the development and learning of children (Pameijer et al. 2009).

School and parents need each other for successful education. Good communication between school and parents increases social-emotional functioning, and the academic performance of children. Children learn better and feel happy at school when their parents feel involved in the school. Personal contact between the teacher and the parents is crucial. Good communication also contributes to a school culture in which teachers and parents stand side by side. This is beneficial for the job satisfaction of teachers and the confidence of parents in the school. Also in the context of appropriate education, parental involvement is relevant. One of the goals of this policy is to strengthen the position of parents in shaping the education and care arrangement for their child.

Parent involvement ensures a collective responsibility and therefore suitable education can be realized. A teacher who has mastered communication skills of the Rose of Leary, Emotional Intelligent or the basic skills of Jutten, can make parents feel themselves taken seriously and make sure there won't be any misunderstanding.

A short summary:

- A positive attitude is very important. The teacher sees parents not as a threat but as a partner who can make a valuable contribution.
- The teacher tries to put herself in the position of parents.
- The teacher indicates that she is sincerely interested in the parents.
- The teacher shows appreciation for the efforts of parents.
- It is important that a teacher dares to ask and has difficult conversations sometimes, because it provides clarity for school and the parents.
- The teacher expresses her expectations of the parents and asks about their expectations of school.
- The teacher must be reliable and transparent. That means, among other things, that she fulfills agreements and that she admits honestly if something went wrong.

In addition, openness in the team is important. The teacher must be open and honest with their colleagues in the things that go well and not go well. Parents feel it when there is mistrust and unrest in the team (Pamijer, Beukering and Lange, 2009).

If the teacher applies interview techniques described above, the chances of a good communication are high, yet it does not mean that all communication with parents will take place in a pleasant and constructive way. The teacher will also conduct difficult conversations. These discussions provide pre-tension. For this there could be many reasons: one reason might be that she feels insecure about her expertise in relation to the problem of the child. The tension then has mainly to do with the content level of the communication. It may also be that she looks up to the parent with whom she enters into the conversation. The tension then has especially to do with the relation level of the communication. And thus there are more reasons why the teacher fears the conversation. If there is a conflict, that really cannot be avoided, she should do something with it.

In all cases, the basis of trust will be decisive. The established relationship will have a great influence on the course of the conversation. Together you have a common interest, which is to promote the development of the child. The teacher should assist where possible. Teacher and parent have their own role and responsibility and are both involved (Bolks, 2011).

In every instance, the established relationship will have a great influence on the course of the conversation. Parent and teacher have a common interest which is to enhance the development of the child. It is for this reason that the teacher and parent should communicate effectively and both parties be responsible and involved. It is the teacher's responsibility however, to use and develop skills and techniques to ensure the most effective communication for all.

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