

PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS ON THE INFLUENCE IMMEDIACY, VERBAL AGGRESSION AND COMPLIANCE GAINING HAVE ON LEARNER PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

In South Africa the educational system has seen many changes over the past few years. Transformation in education has been introduced to correct imbalances of the previous South African educational system and to improve learner achievement in some of the previously disadvantaged schools. Despite changes that have been implemented, learners in many South African schools are still underperforming. The primary aim of this investigation reported in this article was to establish the extent to which selected micro communication factors, namely, immediacy, verbal aggression and compliance gaining influence learner achievement. The researcher argues that micro communication factors in the classroom could influence learner performance either positively or negatively. According to Robinson, learner achievement refers to the ability of a learner to succeed in an assessment and to display a satisfactory level of competence.

Keywords: communication, micro communication, immediacy, verbal aggression, compliance gaining

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication influences every aspect of our lives and has become instrumental in organisational success today. According to Barker and Gaut, communication is a complex, two-way, interactive process that involves two or more individuals who make use of verbal and non-verbal language in order to convey meaning that influences the behaviour of another individual (Barker and Gaut, 2002:18-19). This process occurs to ensure the satisfaction of needs in individuals and ultimately guarantees the survival of human beings. Similarly, Berko, Wolvin and Wolvin explain that communication is a process where information is conveyed from a sender to a receiver (2010:5). Lemmer, Meier and Van Wyk clarify the communication process by dividing it into different classes (2009:35-36). They elaborate that communication is a two-way process that consists of the following components:

- A sender (class educator);
- A message (explanation, information or instruction);
- A code (words, pictures or symbols);

- A channel (face-to-face interaction, a written instruction, the intercom system at the school);
- The receivers (the learners) (Lemmer, Meier and Van Wyk, 2009:36; bullets and bold my own).

The aforementioned process clearly depicts a typical communication activity in a class. However, during this interactive process miscommunication or misinterpretation could occur. During this process communication breakdowns or communication failure could occur as a result of immediacy, verbal aggression and/or compliance gaining.

2. THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT

Many learners in South African schools are underperforming and there are various and varied communication factors that may contribute to poor learner achievement. These factors include, but are not limited to, relationships between Educators and learners, language barriers, ineffective communication skills, methods used to communicate, communication apprehension, communication between the Provincial Department of Education (PDoE) and schools, as well as between Principals and Educators. This study draws attention to immediacy, verbal aggression and compliance that have in recent years become areas of concern in South African classrooms.

In the researcher's experience as an educator, he ascribes unsuccessful communication and miscommunication as key to the failure of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in South Africa. Van Rooyen explains that OBE is a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning. This implies that educational outputs are important in the acquisition of competencies that learners will use in the future. The successful implementation of OBE was compromised from the start because of ineffective communication practices, such as Educators not being informed timeously about OBE training sessions and changes to the curriculum.

Similarly, Goodboy and Myers believe that quality instruction is characterised by effective communication behaviours that Educators employ during facilitation and instructional processes (2009:108). They claim that positive behavioural patterns are closely linked to immediacy, which fosters positive relationships between Educators and learners (*ibid.*). Jones, Ricketts, Ulmer and Williams (2008:53) explain that quality instruction should provide a learner with an opportunity to be part of the learning process. In this way the learner is encouraged to take responsibility for his/her own learning and participate in educational activities. As such, the learner should be able to improve his/her academic performance.

3 CONCEPTS

3.1 Immediacy

Robinson defines educator immediacy as the strategies educators use to reduce the physical and psychological distance between educators and learners (2007:1). Good relationships between educators and learners foster an environment where educators and learners are relaxed, thus creating an ideal situation for learning to occur (ibid.). Similarly, Baringer and McCrosky explain that immediacy involves educator behaviours that encourage closeness between educators and learners (2000:178).

Bainbridge-Frymier and Houser focus on communication skills in the context of educator and student relationships, the following serving as specific guidelines:

- how students view the importance of communication skills during instruction;
- students' thoughts regarding educators' ability to communicate;

Identifying whether there is a difference between male and female views regarding the importance of communication and how it affects student learning (Bainbridge-Frymier & Houser, 2000:207).

Bainbridge-Frymier and Houser maintain that students believe that communication skills are very important, especially regarding excellent teaching practices, referential skill, ego support and conflict management (2000:215). They state that referential skill refers to the process of explaining and clarifying, to ensure understanding, whereas ego support assists learners to gain confidence and belief in their ability to succeed in a given task (ibid.).

Gorham and Zakahi's (1990:354-356) investigation reveals that there is a correlation between educator immediacy and student learning. Specifically, that positive relationships between educators and learners improve learner achievement; and conversely, that negative relationships between educators and learners impair student performance (ibid.). Gorham and Zakahi point out that research regarding educator immediacy has been based primarily on specific non-verbal factors, such as vocal expressions, smiling and body language, as well as verbal factors such as rewarding, humour and involving all learners when verbal communication takes place (1990).

3.2 Verbal aggression

Sullivan states that verbal aggression includes spreading hurtful rumours, using abusive language and making violently threatening racist remarks towards either fellow learners or educators (2000:11).

According to Myburgh and Poggenpoel verbal aggression includes using vulgar language, name-calling, insulting remarks and belittling learners in front of their peers (2009: 453-544). Their investigation reveals how verbal aggression affects learners in South African schools adversely and how these learners can be assisted (ibid.). De Wet's research focuses on the prevalence of bullying in schools in the Free State, specifically regarding "educator experiences" (De Wet, 2006:61). She reveals in her findings that verbal bullying occurs the most frequently and that both educators and learners are guilty of this form of abuse. She recommends that because verbal bullying has extreme consequences, both educators and learners should refrain from practising such abuse (De Wet, 2006).

Hassandra, Bekiari and Sakellariou postulate that the consequences of verbal aggression towards learners include their experiencing feelings of low self-worth and a negative self-concept (2009:453). They feel that this form of verbal abuse results in extreme resentment and melancholy among learners (ibid.). The researcher is concerned that verbal aggression could influence learner performance negatively, especially if this is a common occurrence in South African classrooms. Tevan asserts that educators who strive to create a caring environment that is conducive to learning, reduce communication apprehension, which results in improved learner performance (Tevan, 2001:159).

Myburgh and Poggenpoel elucidate that verbal aggression results in learners regarding their educational environment as unsafe; that disciplinary measures are inconsistent and not in keeping with the Code of Conduct of the school; and that learners fail to achieve educational outcomes (2009:456). They recommend that learners adversely affected by verbal aggression should focus on:

- developing good interpersonal relationships;
- improving their listening skills;
- improving their verbal and non-verbal communication skills;
- developing positive attitudes

in order to improve their overall academic performance (Myburg and Poggenpoel, 2009:457). The researcher concurs with Myburg and Poggenpoel's recommendations regarding ways of dealing with verbal aggression.

Several studies regarding violence in schools, such as those conducted by Sela-Shayovitz (2009:1061-1066), Netshitahame and Vollenhoven (2002:313-318) as well as Zulu, Urbani and Van der Merwe (2004:170-175) all allude to aspects of verbal aggression. They concur that verbal aggression negatively influences the culture of teaching and learning, as well as learner performance in schools.

3.3 Compliance gaining

Lopes, Monteiro, Sil, Rutherford and Quinn (2004:2) as well as Peleg (2009:4) state that disruptive learners increase the Educator's responsibility regarding classroom and behaviour management. They claim that disciplining learners is a time consuming process that could affect the overall performance of numerous learners. In the researcher's capacity as a full-time South African secondary Educator and tertiary lecturer, this has been his experience as well. However, in some instances it is only disruptive learners who fail assessments, whereas conscientious learners still perform well.

Coetzee, Van Niekerk and Wydeman assert that "effective communication skills" (2010:82) are very important in establishing good classroom discipline. They recommend that educators develop an effective discipline policy that should foster an environment conducive to learning (ibid.). Coetzee et al. state that such an environment can be created by including:

- a set of rules that learners should abide by;
- consequences that learners should face for deliberately overstepping rules;
- and a reward system for learners who obey the rules (2006:253).

They recommend that a classroom discipline policy be drawn up by both educators and learners in order to ensure compliance to the policy (ibid.). The research of Mji and Makgato (2006:253) focuses on why South African learners underperform in Mathematics and Physical Science. Their reasons listed for underperformance include learners being disruptive and displaying inappropriate behaviour in class (ibid.). This finding is pertinent to this investigation because compliance gaining is a communicative process that could impede learner performance.

In addition, Oosthuizen, Wolhuter and Du Toit's (2003:457) investigation of whether preventative or punitive disciplinary procedures should be used in South African schools is reason enough to assume that learner discipline is problematic in a number of South African schools. The researcher believes that disciplinary problems impact directly on effective communication in classes, which could hinder scholastic achievement and the overall progress of learners in South African schools. However, the researcher also believes that disciplined classes lead to greater success regarding the attainment of educational goals and the overall improvement of academic performance.

Kruger and Van Schalkwyk argue that Educators who are able to maintain discipline in the classroom enhance the learning experience of learners (2011:7). Through effective "classroom management" (ibid.), in itself an important communicative process, Educators are able to achieve educational outcomes. The researcher concurs with this notion as stated in the aforementioned paragraph.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

Cohen, Manion and Morrison posit that a mixed-method design is a strategy for collecting quantitative and qualitative data in one investigation in order to understand the research problem (2011:25). This approach addresses both the “what (numerical and qualitative data) and how or why (qualitative types of research questions)” (ibid.). characteristic of this investigation as well.

An exploratory mixed-method design was implemented to collect information regarding the influence of selected micro communication factors on learner achievement in schools in the Free State. The researcher selected this design because of its suitability regarding the present study. The researcher designed a School Communication-Effectiveness Questionnaire (SCEQ) as a data-gathering instrument in the quantitative part of the investigation, which he distributed to educators. They had to express their views regarding communication factors that could influence learner achievement, such as immediacy, communication apprehension and compliance gaining.

Salkind (2009:308) explains that an interview is an exchange of ideas and information between people on a subject that is of interest to both parties in order to gain insight into a specific area of knowledge (2009:308). Similarly, Cohen, Manion and Morrison elucidate that the aim of an interview is to obtain information from respondents concerning issues that are related to the research problem (2004:268). With regard to this study, the interview (as qualitative method to collect data) has served to determine the influence that immediacy, communication apprehension and compliance gaining have on learner achievement. Principals and Subject Advisors were interviewed to determine whether the aforementioned factors, that is, immediacy, verbal aggression and communication apprehension influence learner achievement.

Davies (2007:550) and Salkind (2009:89) define a population as a group of people who have similar characteristics. McMillan and Schumacher (2006:119) elucidate that a population is a group of individuals who share certain traits, but who, in addition, are working towards the accomplishment of common goals. In this investigation, the broader population is the teaching fraternity, specifically Principals, Subject Advisors and Educators. Mouton (2006:132) and Salkind (2009:89) explain that sampling is the process of selecting a subsection of the broader population, in order to make generalisations from the selected sample. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2004:103-104) argue that a good investigation requires attention to be given to the sampling size and accessibility of the sample. The sample should also be representative of the broader population (ibid.), as is the case in this study. The researcher implemented random sampling, that is, he selected a group of respondents from the broader population.

A Statistical Programme designed for Statistical Analysis of Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the SCEQ administered to Educators. The SPSS programme was used to calculate the average scores of the items on the questionnaires.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison point out that there are different stages involved in the analysis of data obtained from interviews, which include:

- generating natural units of meaning;
- classifying, categorizing and ordering these units of meaning;
- structuring narratives to describe the interview contents;
- interpreting the interview data (2004:282; bullets my own).

The researcher used the aforementioned method to analyse the data obtained from the interviews conducted with Principals and Subject Advisors. He grouped the information obtained from the respondents according to specific themes. This ensured drawing meaningful conclusions from the collected data as explained by Cohen et al., (2004:282).

5. FINDINGS

The educators (92%) believe that immediacy (as a micro communication factor) between Educators and learners in the classroom influences learner achievement to a very large extent and to a large extent. Only eight percent (8%) of the respondents indicated that this factor influences learner achievement to a small extent or not at all. This research finding verifies the researcher's view that the relationship between educators and learners in the classroom could influence learner achievement. Principals and Subject Advisors share the sentiment of educators that immediacy could influence learner achievement to a large extent. Therefore positive relationships between the educator and learner should improve learner performance in the classroom.

Forty-nine percent of the educators indicated that verbal aggression, where educators use insulting or belittling remarks in the classroom, influences learner achievement to a very large extent. On the other hand, 51% of the educators indicated that this factor influences learner achievement to a small extent or not at all. Contrary to the researcher's view, the majority of respondents believe that educators using belittling remarks do not impact learner performance to a very large extent. The researcher believes that educators should be informed of the negative consequences of using belittling and/or insulting remarks in the classroom. For example, learners could develop negative attitudes and be disinterested in mastering learning content. Principals and Subject Advisors also believe that verbal aggression could influence learner achievement to a large extent. It is their view that educators using verbal aggression could result in learners withdrawing from class participation and consequently communication in the class would be one-way. This could negatively affect the academic achievement of learners.

Educators (90%) indicated that compliance gaining, that is, when learners pay attention in class (a micro communication factor) influences learner achievement to a very large extent and to a large extent. Only 10% of respondents concur that this factor influences learner achievement to a small extent or not at all. This research finding verifies the researcher's view that educators who are able to create an environment that is conducive to learning, are in a better position to improve learner performance than Educators who are not able to maintain discipline in the classroom. Similarly, Subject Advisors and principals believe that compliance is a problem in South African classrooms and that poor learner discipline is a major problem in South Africa.

Subject Advisors and Principals have expressed similar views regarding immediacy, verbal aggression and compliance gaining among educators. They have indicated that problematic interpersonal relationships are very often prevalent among educators and learners. This is owing to learners being disruptive or disobedient during classes. Consequently, confrontations between educators and learners result in verbal aggression, which often inflames an already volatile situation.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Educators should be informed that communication apprehension does influence learner achievement, as indicated by respondents in the present investigation. Learners who do not experience communication apprehension are not apprehensive about expressing their opinions or asking questions when they do not understand. Conversely, communication apprehension influences learner performance negatively when learners are afraid to express their opinions or ask questions when they do not understand. Educators could play an important role in reducing communication apprehension in the classroom by creating a relaxed environment in which learners can learn. By creating such a positive educational climate in the classroom communication apprehension could be reduced. In addition, positive relationships between educators and learners should improve learner performance in the classroom.

Verbal aggression could be reduced should educators adopt a communication strategy that does not infringe the rights of learners. At the same time educators should be assertive to avoid problematic classroom behaviour and endeavour to improve overall classroom discipline. In addition, learners should be taught the positive value of discipline in the classroom and comply accordingly.

Good interpersonal relationships between educators and learners are essential for learners to achieve educational outcomes. The three communication factors examined in this study, that is, immediacy, communication apprehension and compliance gaining, prove to be significant factors in determining educational success. These factors should be taken into consideration during communication in the classroom. Noteworthy is that respondents concur that these factors could affect learner achievement adversely.

In South Africa where learner performance is problematic, every effort should be made to create environments that are conducive to learning and where maximum outputs regarding educational outcomes are the order of the day.

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