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Relationality in the Process of Didactic Communication Between a Teacher and Students at Early School Age Through the Prism of Parental Narratives

**Relacyjność w procesie komunikacji dydaktycznej nauczyciela i uczniów
w młodszy wieku szkolnym przez pryzmat rodzicielskich narracji**

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Abstract

Introduction. Positive relations between a teacher and students require not only professional knowledge of the principles and rules of communication, but also the ability to use them in didactic practice. Parents’ reflection on the communication between the child and the teacher in educational situations can contribute to the exchange of information between subject entities of education conducive to optimizing the educational process.

Aim. The aim of the research was to determine how parents perceive the communication relations between early school education teachers and children in the didactic process and to determine the factors that—in their opinion—facilitate building a relationship between the teacher and the child during the learning process.

Methods and materials. The article presents the results of qualitative research, embedded

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in the interpretative paradigm, conducted using the method of an individual open interview. The research included parents of children at early-school age.

Results. Based on the analysis of parents' statements, response categories were distinguished. The categories reflect the ways in which the respondents perceive the teacher-child communication relations through the prism of their effectiveness for the learning process in the early grades of primary school.

Conclusion. The surveyed parents prefer a model of teacher-child communication relations expressed in attentive listening to the child, interest, and openness to information shared by the child. However, in the opinion of a significant number of the respondents, teachers often pretend to have a dialogue with children. The voice of parents may be a contribution to teachers' in-depth reflection on building communication relations with children in the educational process.

Keywords: early school education, relationships, communication, teacher, child, educational process

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Pozytywne relacje nauczyciela z uczniami wymagają nie tylko profesjonalnej wiedzy z zakresu zasad i reguł komunikacji, ale umiejętności wykorzystywania ich w praktyce dydaktycznej. Refleksja rodziców nad porozumiewaniem się dziecka i nauczyciela w sytuacjach edukacyjnych może stanowić przyczynek do wymiany informacji między podmiotami edukacji w celu optymalizacji procesu kształcenia.

Cel. Celem badań było ustalenie, jak rodzice postrzegają relacje komunikacyjne nauczycieli edukacji wczesnoszkolnej z dziećmi w procesie dydaktycznym i określenie czynników, które w ich ocenie, sprzyjają budowaniu relacji z dzieckiem przez nauczyciela w trakcie uczenia się.

Metody i materiały. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań jakościowych, osadzonych w paradygmacie interpretatywnym, przeprowadzonych za pomocą metody indywidualnego wywiadu otwartego. Badaniami objęto rodziców dzieci w młodszym wieku szkolnym.

Wyniki i wnioski. Badani rodzice preferują wzorzec relacji komunikacyjnych nauczyciela z dziećmi wyrażający się w uważnym słuchaniu dziecka, zainteresowaniem i otwartością na informacje przekazywane przez dziecko. Jednak w ocenie znacznej części z nich, nauczyciele często pozorują dialog z dziećmi. Głos rodzica może stanowić przyczynek do podejmowania przez nauczycieli pogłębionej refleksji nad budowaniem relacji komunikacyjnych z dziećmi w procesie kształcenia.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja wczesnoszkolna, relacje, komunikacja, nauczyciel, dziecko, proces kształcenia

Introduction

The challenges posed by the contemporary world, through intensive technological and scientific development, are related to the emergence of new spaces of human activity, and consequently new problems related to them, connected with cognitive and ethical relativism and the need for a quick response to changes. Lech W. Zacher (2013, p. 131) emphasizes that “(...) the increasingly technological, virtualized and cyberspatial hybrid world will require new thinking, a new language of narrative and analysis, new paradigms for its understanding and control (...)”. Postmodern existence in the world entails not only the necessity of designing an existence grounded in the future, but also the need for searching for ways of its proper and reasonable functioning, realizing and presenting in many spaces of activity simultaneously and in various social and intercultural relations. This means that we must learn to live and function in an extremely diverse and dynamic environment. The inevitability of changes in the immediate and distant environments creates the need to develop pro-adaptive competences in children/students, from the earliest levels of education. The authors of the report: *Raport edukacja: Między pandemią COVID-19 a edukacją przyszłości* (Education report: Between the COVID-19 pandemic and the education of the future, Czapliński *et al.*, 2020), outlining a map of the most important and most urgent problems that appeared in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic in education, indicated the need to retransform the still dominant transmission model of the Polish education system, which stimulates imitative and mechanical thinking, into a relational model that can stimulate and develop reflective and creative thinking based on imagination. Such thinking, in turn, allows for taking anticipatory actions and actively shaping reality. Its dissemination equips communities and society with the ability of systemic adaptation and transformation, which becomes an important competence in the unpredictability and variability of the environment.

In this context, shaping and developing students' competences in building relationships in contacts with other people at the lowest levels of education is of key importance. This process between people is possible thanks to communication, in which there is a mutual exchange through various actions, verbal and non-linguistic symbols, as well as assigning certain common meanings (Konieczna, 2019). The term *relations in the education process* is most often considered in reference to the main subject entities of education, *i.e.*, teachers and students, covering the influence of teachers on the current behavior of students, their social and intellectual development, contribution to maintaining their mental health, and their adaptation to life in society, as well as the characteristics of the teacher and their daily contacts with students (Cohen *et al.*, 1999).

In descriptions of teaching and learning practices, relations mean something valuable and worthy of nurturing. The features of relationships emphasize their agency and the voice of the student, dialogue, engagement, and transformative interactions between teachers and students (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Joldersma, 2018; Morgan *et al.*, 2015). According to Maria Tylikowska (2014), relations that are based on a subject-oriented approach to the other person, free from instrumental treatment through the prism of one's own needs or goals, going beyond playing social roles, are a *sine qua non* condition for establishing dialogue. Among the inalienable properties of dialogical relationships, the author lists: *bringing* oneself into the dialogical relations by both parties, their experiences and skills and at the same time mutually *drawing* from them, as well as indefiniteness, requiring the dialogue partners to be open to themselves and the other person. She also writes about the dialogical relation that it is “alive in the sense that it is like breathing, which always takes place here and now, without any previous assumptions—free from patterns conditioned by the influences of the community, culture or personal experience encoded in memory” (Tylikowska, 2014, p. 85).¹ Personal relationships in dialogue are expressed in mutual sharing of oneself, one's reflections, beliefs, co-experiencing, openness to the other, and unconditional acceptance of the person (Cosmopoulos, 2001). On the one hand, the relationship is the actual and real basis of dialogue, on the other hand, dialogue is the basic medium shaping the relationship (Szabat, 2015). Only skillful establishment of relations and creation of safe cooperation between the teacher and students through effective communication will be conducive to achieving positive cognitive, emotional, and social results (Sztejnberg, 2007).

The cognitive perspective of the considerations undertaken in the article is determined by the understanding of the educational process as a series of communicative situations within which cognitive actions are undertaken. They take the form of interactions, the partners of which, *i.e.*, the teacher and student, refer to something in the physical, social, and subjective worlds in order to achieve a common understanding and construction of meanings (Bałachowicz & Witkowska-Tomaszewska, 2015). As emphasized by Jonas Aspelin (2021), there can be no teaching without a bond between the teacher and the student. Similarly, according to Jessi Hinz, John Paul Stephens, and Ellen B Van Oosten (2022), the pedagogical relationship proceeds when teachers and students are mutually “sensitive to the developing dynamic understanding emerging out of what is being shared” (p. 78). The results of research conducted in recent years (Jarkiewicz & Szulewicz, 2023; Kochanowska, 2019; Wiśniewska & Łukasiewicz-Wieleba, 2021; Zielińska-Czopek, 2023) on the quality of communica-

¹ Author's own translation.

tion relations between teachers and children still often indicate a dominant asymmetric system of relations and a diverse scope of rights of teachers and students.

These studies most often present the issue of relationships in the educational process from the perspective of researchers and teachers, as well as students-future educators considered as the observers of educational practice. Parents' approach to communication relations between teachers and children in the didactic context is rarely the subject of research, and the results presented so far refer mainly to parents' expectations towards the school as such, including the ways in which the teacher carries out tasks (Gawlik, 2021; Jakubowicz-Bryx, 2015; Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2021 and others). Parental activity is perceived as an important element of the development of the school and teachers (Mendel, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2013), but in practice, parents most often become observers of events that the school organizes for them, such as meetings, consultations, festivals, etc., they are performers of parental duties or volunteers for the school (Symeou, 2001). Although they rarely have the opportunity to observe their children's communication relations with the teacher during classes, during the implementation of educational content (*e.g.*, during open classes for parents) they have their own beliefs on this subject based primarily on conversations with their children and other parents. They can also relate their observations with memories and their own experiences from the time of their education. The need for parents to reflect on school practices is particularly emphasized by the critical-emancipatory discourse on parental involvement in the educational process. According to it,

[...] parents are considered competent partners in relations with teachers, who not only know their children very well (which is beneficial in the teaching process), but also have the right to speak about their children and the school's activities. However, it is not only about giving parents a voice, but also about including this voice in the broad communication of the school, family and local environment. (Wiatr, 2019, p. 215).

The attempt made in the article to present communication relations between teachers and students allows us to learn the parents' perspective on their children's school communication relations with teachers in the learning process. The conducted research aimed to show the significance given by parents to the communication relations between teachers and children at early school age during the learning process. Research problems took the form of questions: what importance do parents give to communication relations occurring between teachers and children at early school age in the learning process? What factors, in the opinion of parents, are conducive to building relations with a child by a teacher in the learning process? In child-teacher relations, there are created experi-

ences, the effects of which are visible not only in the child's way of learning, but also influence the child's attitude to learning at higher stages of education.

The Child's Experience of Communication Relationality in the Family and at School—Theoretical Approach

The child's first environment for (not)experiencing communication relationality is their family. The child's family is the environment that creates basic and long-lasting models of specific forms of communication (Harwas-Napierała, 2006), because parents are the first to provide the child with communication patterns in a purposeful, but also unconscious, manner and create conditions for communication. In the family environment, there is a specific linguistic activity of adult family members directed at the child, focused on teaching communication and using it for understanding. Danuta Opozda (2012), describing relationality as one of the special attributes of communication in the family environment, emphasizes that the more correct and mature the relationship is, the better the educational impact and its effectiveness are. Family communication undergoes developmental transformations, which are characterized by a transition from asymmetrical, although initially mutual, relations to those of symmetrical (partnership) character, featuring an increasing share of verbal forms of communication (Harwas-Napierała, 2006). Family communication is characterized by great variability and dynamics, which means that the communication order maintained at a given time, as a result of new circumstances within the system or in relations with other external systems, may be disrupted and cause changes in previous rituals and habits (Nęcki, 2000).

Symmetrical relations are of key importance in family communication, where there is equality and mutual reflection of the communication partner's behavior. Moving towards a symmetrical relationship, searching for a common ground leads to significant changes in the process of developing human communication. This translates into the relational nature of man and understanding communication in terms of synergy (Stewart, 2002). Parents giving the right importance to the child's relational development, consisting of in "improving interpersonal exchange and communication" (Wal, 2013, p. 242), is a necessary condition for preparing them for dialogue also in the outer-family space, including school. Communication experiences in the family may affect the child's way of communicating in the kindergarten and school environment.

The report *Poza horyzont: Kurs na edukację: Przyszłość systemu rozwoju kompetencji w Polsce* (Beyond the horizon: Course for education: The Future of the competence development system in Poland; Hausner, 2020) emphasizes that:

relations the basis for effective educational activity in terms of an individual as well as a group of learners. Relational education is based on the conscious creation of situations in which the experience of reality takes place in a direct relationship between the participants of this process, established in joint activities [...]. Such a model allows for the building of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, which constitute integral effects of education as components of competences. In this way, the school prepares students for life in a world in which many people must cooperate, presenting different values, perspectives and ideas. (p. 48)

As emphasized by Maria Szymańska (2016), the relation that can be described as subject entity oriented is shaped from the first meeting of a student with their teacher. Its nature seems to be particularly important, especially in the early school period, when a child draws patterns of behavior from people perceived by them as authorities. Changes in behavior, experiences, constructions of concepts, and undertaken activities depend on education, considered as a specific type of communication between students and their teacher. Due to the specificity of an adult's position towards a child, as well as the communication differences realized in various dimensions: linguistic, interactive, relational, individualistic (Rostańska, 2018), the analysis of teacher-student communication relations in didactic situations allows determining their effectiveness in the context of a child's learning of the intended educational content at school.

Research Procedure

In the context of the theoretical assumptions indicated above, the conducted research aimed to show what significance is given by parents to the communication relations between teachers and children at early school age in the learning process. The research was to determine how parents perceive the communication relations between teachers and children in the didactic process and outline the factors that, in their opinion, facilitate the building of such relations. When planning the research project, the author referred to the qualitative strategy. Due to the adoption of the interpretative paradigm of qualitative research, the research was aimed at showing the different approaches of parents to the relations established by teachers with children in didactic situations aimed at achieving educational goals. For Lawrence Neuman (1994, p. 62):

The most important in an interpretative approach is the systematic analysis of social meanings created by people in their natural functioning conditions, with a view to understanding and interpreting how people create and understand the world in which they function.

My study focuses on the teacher's communication relations with children in the learning process. Research problems took the form of questions:

What importance do parents give to communication relations between teachers and children at early school age in the learning process?

How do parents perceive communication relations of early school education teachers with children in the didactic process?

What factors, in the opinion of parents, are conducive to building relations with a child by a teacher in the learning process?

Answers to the above questions were provided by the analysis of the statements of parents, which they shared during individually conducted open interviews. The parents' reflections and deliberations on the issues raised in the questions allowed for the reconstruction of experience, the formulation of conclusions that go beyond the narrow horizon of what is specific, but above all, they allow for understanding the meaning of their participation in the educational reality (Łukasik, 2014, p. 212). The applied method of an individual open interview did not assume repetitive questions or a specific order of issues raised. The use of an open form allowed for interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. The interviewer was guided by a general plan of action, but it was not a specific set of questions that should be asked using specific words in a set order (Babbie, 2008). As a result, the open interview allowed us to capture what the respondents, not the researchers who are only looking for confirmation of their own thesis, think about reality. The research covered seventeen parents. With such a number of respondents, the result field was exhausted, which means that new contexts stopped appearing in the respondents' statements (Hammerslay & Atkinson, 2000). The selection of respondents was purposeful. The criterion for their selection was the fact that the child attended grades I–III of primary school. The research was conducted directly by the researcher in the period from November 2024 to February 2025. Among the respondents were fourteen mothers and three fathers. The study group consisted of eleven respondents with higher education, four with secondary education and two with vocational education. The research was conducted on dates proposed by the parents in four schools in the Province of Silesian conditions and atmosphere ensuring anonymity and freedom of expression. According to the adopted research approach, the ways of understanding the studied phenomenon expressed in the material subjected to analysis implied the categories of description established by the researcher. They are "generalized and structured descriptions of understanding

phenomena present in the experience of the respondents” (Męczkowska, 2002, p. 18).² The categories of description were selected by condensing themes that emerged during the process of familiarization with the respondents’ answers. The categories of description are always both individual and collective, which means that the same statement may reflect various expressions of the same or different concepts (Jurgiel, 2009).

Research Results

In accordance with the adopted qualitative research procedure, the presentation of results (for the purposes of this study) was limited to presenting response categories identified as a result of content analysis of parents’ statements that appeared in the interview, with the dominant tendencies in their selection highlighted. Due to the adoption of the interpretative paradigm of qualitative research, the research did not aim to consider the phenomenon under study in terms of quantity and multiplicity, which is characteristic of the quantitative approach, but to extract meanings and dimensions. The analysis of empirical material obtained as a result of research conducted on small groups of people is qualitative in nature and does not involve statistical tools. Nevertheless, David Silverman (2008) indicates the possibilities of using quantitative terms in qualitative and explanatory projects. He justifies this as follows: “Simple computational techniques can become a way to probe the entire set of data that is usually lost during intensive qualitative research” (Silverman, 2008, p. 62). The analysis of the respondents’ statements led to the identification of categories for their analysis. However, it should be emphasized that the division into categories is not exclusive.

Category 1: The validity of the teacher’s relational competences in the child’s learning process: relationships as the foundation of learning versus a factor accompanying the child’s acquisition of new knowledge and skills in communication with the teacher.

The analysis of the parents’ statements shows that all respondents attribute key importance to building relationships with the child by teachers in the process of communication during school classes. They connect the concept of communication relations with creating an appropriate climate, an atmosphere of learning, based on a sense of security and acceptance of the student. This is illustrated by the following statements³:

For me, good relationships between teachers and students make children feel good at school. And that is the most important, crucial thing. Then, in this relationship, you can build the child’s knowledge and skills. It is very important

² Author’s own translation.

³ The quoted statements of parents were included in the article verbatim.

how the teacher talks to a child... (W4)⁴

I believe that the teacher-child relations are the most important when they talk. Only then one can you move on to learning and build on that. Without good communication, the teacher will do nothing... (W15)

In the opinion of the parents surveyed, relations are the foundation which the teacher should build, in order to base the education process on it. Only some of the parents (7 respondents) expanded the concept of communication relations in their statements to include creating conditions for dialogue with a child in the learning process by teachers by encouraging them to speak up, actively listening to children and genuine interest in what the child knows and says, how they understand a given issue and what they want to know.

Good communication relations between a teacher and a child allow the child to learn new knowledge and skills actively. They allow the child to be active during the classes, speak freely, asks questions. If the teacher is open to the child, curious about what they have to say, the child wants to learn... (W1)

In this sense, proper communication relations with the child are a condition for the child's active participation in the education process, independent acquisition of knowledge and building a sense of responsibility for the learning process.

Category 2: Openness and developmental nature of teacher-child communication relations versus teacher's imitation of dialogical relations in the child's learning process

All respondents emphasized the importance of proper communication relations in the child's learning process, the essence of which is expressed in the teacher's openness to a student's knowledge and respect for a child's right to verbal activity in the learning process. In the opinion of parents, during communication, the behavior of the teacher and student should be complementary. Both subject entities of education should complement each other with messages. However, only slightly more than half of the respondents (9 parents) assessed the communication relations between the teacher and the child as characterized by the teacher's genuine care and interest in the child's cognitive needs and their level of motivation to learn. Such teachers, when formulating messages, set themselves the goal of co-constructing meanings, norms, frameworks of interaction and action together with children. "If a teacher is open to what their student wants to say, tries to understand them and use it during communication, then he/she gives the child the opportunity to learn independently, actively"

⁴ The symbol (W) indicates the number of the interview.

(W7). “Good relations during classes at school? A child can say if he/she does not understand something or has doubts. He/she can share what he knows. He/she is not afraid of giving the wrong answer...” (W20).

In the opinion of the remaining parents (8 respondents), the nature of communication relations with the child indicates that the teachers simulate dialogue. Such relations are characterized by the predominance of the teacher’s messages, *i.e.*, verbal “overactivity,” too many orders, instructing, formulating questions such as: *guess what I mean* instead of encouraging children to answer and make associations independently.

I don’t know... When I listen to my child when he tells what happened at school, I have the impression that he constantly has to do everything to keep up with the teacher. He is often stressed, complains that he is afraid to ask about something, *e.g.*, when he does not understand how to do the task. He can’t speak up without being asked. Then I have the impression that it’s my childhood school and nothing has changed for the better, that’s sad... (W3)

I have the impression that the teacher is constantly telling my child what to do and how to do it. It’s best if he doesn’t make a mistake. The teacher is constantly correcting, improving, and telling what to do next (W24)

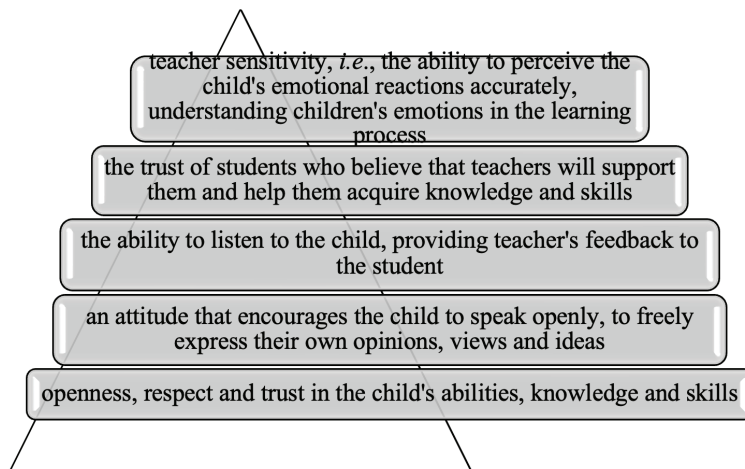
The indicated communication situations indicate asymmetric communication dependencies between the child and the adult. The child’s experience of asymmetry in communication relations also occurs when the teacher declares help and indicates themselves as the guarantor of the child’s action (Rostańska, 2010). The relations presented by the parents are characterized by the lack of two-way exchange.

Category 3: Key factors influencing the quality and effectiveness of the child’s learning process perceived through the prism of the teacher’s and child’s communication relations.

From the analysis of the statements provided by the parents, it can be concluded what communication behaviors of the teacher are, in their opinion, effective in building subjective relations that support children’s learning. In their statements, the respondents emphasized above all the great importance of the teacher’s integral care for the child’s emotions and knowledge. According to the respondents, the sense of security in the learning process is essential, the child’s awareness that they may make a mistake when answering the teacher’s questions is crucial here. The teacher’s interest in what the student says, using his or her own thoughts in creating the educational process and not ignoring what the child says instead of transmitting subsequent messages, gives the child the feeling that what he or she thinks and says is important.

Figure 1

Factors determining effective communication relations between teacher and child in the learning process



Relational communication enables giving support to another person, and also allows for cognitive and emotional openness. This is significant for the course and quality of a child's education (Harwas-Napierała, 2006).

Discussion of Results and Summary

Positive communication relations between the teacher and students require not only understanding the essence of the idea of subjectivity in education, professional knowledge of the principles and rules of interpersonal communication, but also the ability to use them in didactic practice. A teacher using communication in which the student is the subject and partner in dialogue creates a basis for effective learning, also at subsequent stages of educational work. Students who are in a supportive, responsive communication relationship with teachers are more willing to take the initiative and learn more effectively.

Learning the opinions of parents on building communication relations between the teacher and the student in didactic situations at the early education stage allowed us to determine what model of didactic communication is used, in their opinion, in grades I–III of primary school from the perspective of parents. The research conducted shows that parents are aware that communication relations are the foundation, the building

of which the teacher should spend time, so that the child's education process can be based on these resources. However, only some of the respondents emphasized the processual nature of communication relations in creating conditions for dialogue with the child by teachers in the learning process. In their opinion, the essence of proper communication relations in the education process lies in the teacher's openness to the student's knowledge and respect for the child's right to verbal activity in the learning process. It is disturbing that a significant number of the respondents assessed the teacher's verbal behavior in communication relations with the child as simulating dialogue. The respondents emphasized the teacher's too frequent monologues during classes with children, the lack of verbal encouragement for children to speak in an unrestrained manner that does not inhibit their verbal activity.

Only a teacher who accepts students as they are takes action to make them want to trust them. Such a teacher is a friendly ally, supporting the child in learning about the world. The essence of the pattern of communication relations between the teacher and children preferred by parents is expressed in attentive listening to the child, interest in, and appropriate response to, information provided by the child. By this approach, the teacher supports children in their self-development and is genuinely interested in the child's emotions in the learning process. Only relational communication, including activities through which messages and information are transmitted in a way that is beneficial to both parties to the process and that influences mutual cognition (Lindberg-Repo & Gronroos, 2004), is the basis for education in dialogue and for dialogue.

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