ASSERTIVENESS IN TEACHER COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The text is an attempt at introducing the issue of teacher communication, in which assertiveness plays an important role. It is extremely rare to pay attention to and write about the use of assertiveness in communication in the context of the teacher's educational functioning. The duties performed make each teacher face the task of skillfully communicating with both the pupils and other staff members so that they can constructively express their requirements and opinions in a way that respects the dignity of both parties. The identification of the elements of assertiveness and communication of the educational partners is the basis for the analysis of the research conducted towards students obtaining teaching qualifications at the Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU in Poland), i.e. potential teachers. Assertiveness, especially when working with students, is an important element that is difficult to teach, so we believe that our research will show the resources as well as potential areas for improvement. The research tool was a questionnaire that included such areas as: defending one's rights in social situations and personal contacts, evaluating - expressing and accepting praise, evaluating - expressing and accepting criticism, expressing positive and negative feelings, expressing opinions, contacting a professional, and entering someone else's territory. The obtained results will become important for formulating recommendations for learning assertive behaviour by teachers in interpersonal conversation, action and cooperation.

Keywords: Teacher, assertiveness, communication, research, learning positive assertiveness by the teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of this article is assertiveness and its understanding. Modern teacher training ignores this important element in the course of studies, focusing on knowledge and certain practical skills. We, like students, are not always assertive in communication and do not always understand the sense of being assertive. And, in addition to the knowledge we pass, as teachers we need to develop internal ways of explaining, interpreting and evaluating relationships with other participants (e.g. students) to be communicative and have good relationships. The way to achieve this

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and not to block assertive behaviour in the name of correct relations with e.g. students and their parents will be shown through our considerations. The article contains a theoretical analysis and conclusions from the research, which we hope will bring knowledge on the subject in question.

ASSERTIVENESS AND ITS UNDERSTANDING

When browsing through the available literature we come across works giving various definitions of assertiveness. The explanations are considered on their own or, in some cases, with rules or training for their use. This study introduces a rare interpretation of assertiveness that appears in teacher communication. The use of such a combination is justified, because the word assertiveness contains a mixture of elements that help to understand it properly. This term is often identified with some anomaly or is associated with negative and unfriendly reception. A disturbing overtone of assertiveness is observed among school staff, students functioning both in the public and private spheres. Wrong behavior, words, violence and aggression are exposed there.

The roots of the word under consideration are in Latin, in the term *assertio*. It refers to the liberation of man from excessive dependence on others and his own fears, uncertainty and aggression in interpersonal contacts [13, p.10]. The word assertiveness can be found in English - *assertive, assertiveness*. It means a specific way of behaviour consisting in firm, strong, self-confident articulation of opinions, revealed to the outside with deep faith in one's skills and the rights to respect others. Paul Mansfeld sees assertiveness in a similar way, writing that it is "(...) self-confidence but, at the same time, respect for the feelings and needs of others, as well as seeking new ways of expressing one's "self" according to the power discovered in oneself and the imperfection accepted" [14, p. 76]. The use of personal and empathic resources combined with knowledge of social behaviour can be an important conglomerate of assertive behavioural factors, as highlighted by Robert E. Becker and Richard. G. Heinberg [4, p. 365 – 395]. The researchers believe that assertiveness, which is a social skill, takes a central position when analyzing the components of behaviour. A lack thereof deprives the teacher of a chance to tolerate many unpleasant events. In such situations, isolation is revealed and potential contacts are even rejected. This is due to the knowledge acquired over the years, personal beliefs and the development of internal ways of interpreting, explaining and

evaluating the course of relations with others, effectively blocking the readiness for assertive behaviour [7, p. 9 - 307. Assertiveness is based on the confidence in fully exercising one's rights [3].

Generally speaking, it can be said to be a resultant of opposing behaviour, i.e. submissiveness, aggression or manipulation, which are not indifferent to the teacher's behaviour, as illustrated in the diagram below.

Aggression

Assertiveness

Submissveness   **Manipulation**
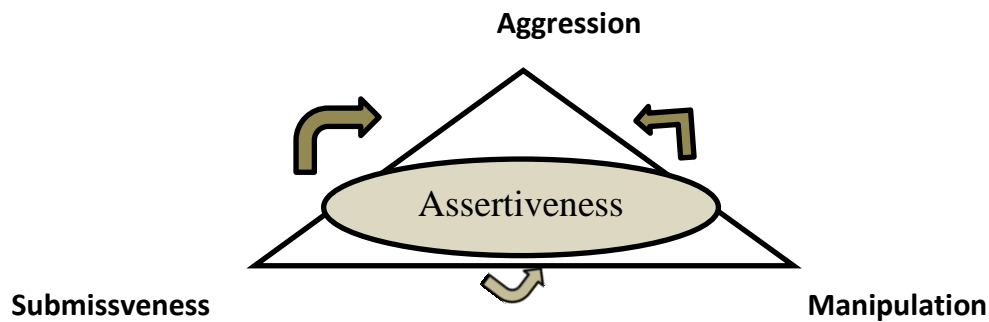
Source; Own elaboration based on R. Poprawa. Assertiveness. Main assumptions, principles, the procedure for assertive coping in life. Training materials, p. 4.

When describing the graphics, the main focus was on the characteristics of assertiveness. It creates a sense of individuality, which is connected with a positive image of one's own person, free demonstration and externalization of one's own and others' rights, and thus helps to achieve previously set goals [17]. In the school environment, a teacher who respects the distinguished recommendations is considered to be a concrete, responsible, factual person who, in a thoughtful and authentic way, sets tasks and requirements for the pupils, marking his or her individual space, but also observes the boundaries of the others' territory. The individual's own space is particularly evident when one feels threatened and enters this invisible area to be defended. It is protected in every possible way so that, on the one hand, nothing contrary to one's own intention is done, although it is sometimes difficult, but, on the other hand, work is carried out according to the will of others. It should be stressed that everyone can become an intruder and enter the area of another person, giving orders, deciding for others, imposing views, ideas, using aggression or manipulation. Harsh and provocative treatment appears in the teacher, too. It may have its roots in experiencing complex problems, stress, dependence on others, feeling fear of different contacts, inappropriate internalisation of behavioural patterns with which s/he does not deal well [2, p.454-481].

Generally, the condition for assertiveness is to learn a variety of skills to express one's opinions, to manifest the joy of hearing compliments, to believe that one is a valuable person, and to accept criticism. A true sense of self-esteem, fitting deeply into the psyche, is crucial. Therefore, assertiveness is not inborn, but can be learned to be successfully applied in the teaching practice. Interpersonal contact and communication, which are an integral part of this social profession, play an important role.

TEACHER COMMUNICATION AND ITS SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS

The second, very important component of the issue in question is communication. The focus is on communication, as it occupies a central position in the teacher's profession. S/He works in small and large groups in the school and extracurricular environment, which is influenced by external factors[10].

As the years go by, communication skills are crystallized in the teacher's activity, which are the result of life experience, a specific and unwavering culture and language. Appreciation of its qualities will be visible in rich relations, in which the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal codes characteristic for the national vocabulary of the teacher's origin will be a key issue. Therefore, interpersonal communication, as Em Gryffin [9] points out, is a two-way, continuous process in the course of which unique meanings common for the contacting persons arise. They use a wide range of language codes, facial expressions and gestures [16]. Interpretation thereof brings an ambiguous understanding translated into a concrete result. According to Em Gryffin, the best effects of common communication are achieved when the images created in the minds of the interlocutors overlap at least partly and fit mentally. This explanation captures selected conditions and beliefs about assertive behavior that are not always analyzed in this way. In particular, the behavioural language of conduct, including expression of positive or negative feelings, is highlighted. This expression of emotion contains symbols and signs that the teacher should know and apply properly, as Sherwyn P. Morreale, Brian M. Spitzberg, J. Kevin Barge [15] or John Fiske [5] point out. In their reflections, the researchers show the existence of a variety of human actions and moves that initially involve these gentle, free, controlled and emotionally coherent behaviors that respect the good of others, through the teacher's assertive behaviour, to aggressive, offensive, and derogatory deeds.

The choice of clear and, at the same time, well-thought-out and consistent behaviour results from the preference for communication functions, i.e.: informative, motivational, regulatory, combined with the transmission of norms and patterns of behaviour, emotional, including feelings, or social functions. The dynamism and efficiency of the sender and recipient of the message, understanding the principles of mutual cooperation between the teacher and students, are emphasised here. They refer to; "the amount of information currently needed to be exchanged, the quality of the content provided, the relationship between the transmission of information and the circumstances of the communication act, the way to communicate" [8].

The teacher's criticism should be about things, not people. This is an obvious principle of every teacher's conduct, but it is not always perfectly implemented. Teachers quite often feel a certain ambiguity of punishment. They want to tell their tutee that he or she is doing (did) something wrong, incorrectly, but at this point they consider the potential effects of their assessment of this kind. Negative reinforcement is a kind of a trap: punishment is more effective than rewarding because it has a measurable effect [18].

Assertive criticism should also be constructive. In this respect, it is important to give the facts without putting a variety of emotions into them. Especially the negative ones are experienced intensively. In this case, Maria Król - Fijewska and Piotr Fijewski [12] advise that assertive criticism should contain a short explanation combined with a meaningful analysis of motives, including answers to three key questions; what, why and how? A lack of argumentation for any of the questions may result in misinterpretation of the messages given by the teacher to the pupils, resulting in either submissiveness, or aggression, or manipulation that consolidates with apparent acceptance. Each of these behaviors has a negative effect, leading to an inappropriate attitude, behaviour, and elimination of the chances to build good relationships in the educational environment and replication of promising patterns by others.

2   METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTES AND RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The theoretical introduction became the basis for designing the research. Initially, all the steps of the research procedure were developed to select the study participants according to the nonprobability sampling principle. These were teachers who had received their Master's degree at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan

(Pedagogical Competence). The largest group of the respondents were women - 149 persons (N=149), while there were 10 men (N=10), the total was 159 respondents (N=159). All the respondents had work experience ranging from 1 to 5 years, most of them worked in primary schools - 80% of the women and 20% of them worked in kindergartens. The men were employed in primary schools. A large city was represented by 65% of the women, a small city – by 30% and a village – by 5%. 100% of the men came from a big city. The given distribution of the people selected for the research confirms the thesis about feminisation of the teaching profession in Poland. In western European countries the ratio of the women and men employed in school education is more balanced. [11].

Assertiveness in the teacher's communication, which appears in different areas of behaviour, has been verified in this study. Therefore, the main aim of the research will be to recognize the selected nine areas of teachers' behaviour, i.e.: defending their rights in social situations, defending their rights in personal situations, receiving praise, accepting criticism, positive feelings, negative feelings, expressing opinions, contacting a professional and entering somebody else's territory. All these components will be verified with a research tool, which is a questionnaire [1, p.39 – 58], and will allow us to find out what kind of assertiveness in communication the respondents prefer.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSION

The figures obtained and their interpretation [6] were collected from the respondents entering the teaching profession. They are facing various people, situations or challenges. Initiated contacts are not subject to rigid rules and patterns, but have a dynamic character. The school environment is a specific space of their occurrence. They are perceived through individually or commonly developed behaviors. Experience, knowledge, facts, in which assertiveness was used or not, are gained from them. Although the research carried out includes a small fragment of the contacts created in the multidimensional educational reality, in the authors' opinion, it is worthwhile to get to know these selected areas. The empirical data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of behavioural map questionnaire data

Overview of	Women-teachers				Men-teachers			
	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No

selected areas	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%	N	F%
Defending your rights in social situations	42	28.3	**57**	**38**	40	27	10	6.7	**6**	**60**	3	30	0	0	1	10
Defending your rights in personal situations	18	12	**61**	**55**	**55**	**37**	15	10	4	40	3	30	2	20	1	10
Evaluation - receiving praise	10	6.7	32	21	**67**	**45**	40	27	1	10	4	40	4	40	1	10
Evaluation - accepting criticism	5	3.5	40	27	**87**	**58**	17	11	1	10	2	20	**5**	**50**	2	20
Feelings - positive	35	24	**110**	**74**	4	2.6	0	0	3	30	**7**	**70**	0	0	0	0
Feelings - negative	31	21	**66**	**44**	45	30	7	4.7	3	30	2	20	3	30	2	20
Expressing opinions	12	8	15	10	**116**	**78**	6	5	0	0	3	30	2	20	**5**	**50**
Contact with a professional	39	26.2	**74**	**49.6**	27	18	9	7	3	30	2	20	1	10	4	40
Entering somebody else's territory	22	15	16	11	**83**	**56**	28	19	1	10	1	10	4	**40**	4	40
Total	214	-	471	-	524	-	132	-	22	-	27	-	21	-	30	-

Source; Own study, test value χ2 and φ were estimated at α = 0.05.

Among the investigated fields, the area with the highest scores is the one concerning the lack of expression of opinion by the women-teachers (78%) confirmed by the significant value of the test χ2 -48.49 and correlation φ = 0.55 at the level of α >0.05. The equivalent area was the one related with expression of positive feelings by 74% of the women (χ2 -3.57, φ = 0.14, α <0.05), which did not obtain a significant value. The men (70%), similarly to the women, considered the area of no significance, yet associated with the expression of positive feelings, as the base area (χ2 -3.57, φ = 0.14, α <0.05). Through their statements, the men (60%) selected the area of defending their rights in social situations (χ2 -8.39, φ =0.22, α>0.05) as the second one, whereas the women saw it further in the hierarchy. In turn, for the women (58%), the area of the lack of acceptance of criticism (χ2 -23.8 ,φ = 0.38, α >0.05) and not entering somebody else's territory (56%) turned out to be more valuable, which was confirmed by the test χ2 -17.94 and the correlation φ = 0.33, at α>0.05. However, the men (50%) stated that for them it was rather worthless to accept criticism and express opinions (50%), which was confirmed by the χ2 test ranging from 9.15 to 15.06, the φ correlation from 0.23 to 0.3, at α>0.05. Similarly, the female teachers (49.6%) preferred contact with a professional (χ2 =18.17, φ = 0.34, α>0.05) at the same level, which the male teachers did not share (40%).

The average value of the statistical intensity of the calculations was rather obtained for the areas concerning not expressing negative feelings by the women and men (30% of each), where the test value χ2 -9.15, φ = 0.23, at α>0.05. Also, the area covering both not accepting and approving critical evaluations (χ2 - 23.8, φ = 0.38, α>0.05) was found at the same level for the men (20%). In turn, the women (28.2%) located the area of contact with a specialist in this numerical range. Only some of the male teachers (40%) accepted contact with a professional and as many of them avoided it (χ2 - 18.17, φ =0.34, α>0.05). Moderate intensification as to the importance of the designated areas was noted for the positive and negative evaluations and feelings, defending one's rights in social situations and contact with a professional in the female teachers (27%). The male teachers (from 20% to 30%) rather defended their rights in social and personal situations, accepted as well as rejected criticism, approved of positive and negative feelings, trying to express a certain opinion (χ2 ranged from 8.39 to 15.06, correlation φ from 0.22 to 0.3, at α>0.05).

The lowest values for positive answers were obtained in the areas of acceptance of praise, expression of opinion, defence of one's rights in personal situations, acceptance and rejection of criticism, which were given in a decreasing order as declared by the female teachers (from 0 to 12%); the value of χ2 ranged from 3.57 (α<0.05) to 23.8, correlation φ from 0.22 to 0.38, at α >0.05, with the exception of the area of positive feelings, where no significance of the performed calculations was obtained). On the other hand, the men (10%) teachers thought that the areas concerning the defence of their rights in social and personal situations, receiving praise, contact with a professional and entering somebody else's territory were of no or minimal importance (χ2 ranged from 15.06 to 23.08, correlation φ from 0.22 to 0.34, at α>0.05).

3. RESULTS

Analyzing the data from the nine examined areas, one can see formation of a certain continuum. At one end of the spectrum, the highest percentage of the respondents was recorded among the women in the area of non-acceptance of expressing opinions, accepting criticism and not entering into another person's territory, while approving support for expressing positive feelings at the same time. Young male teachers, on the other hand, had a positive view on the areas concerning expressing positive feelings, defending their rights in social situations.

They marginalized the assessment related to accepting criticism and expressing opinions about others in direct contacts. At the other extreme, that of the lowest values, the female teachers optimistically qualified such areas as: receiving praise, expressing opinions and defending their rights in personal situations. They minimized areas such as: expressing positive feelings, expressing opinions, expressing negative feelings, contact with a professional, defending their rights in social and personal situations and accepting criticism. At the opposite end, the men referred favourably to the area of evaluating the acceptance of praise, receiving criticism, and entering another person's territory. They reduced the importance of the areas of defending their rights in social and personal situations, balanced the acceptance and rejection of praise and criticism and denied contact with a professional.

The beneficiaries' visible choices of the areas and their location on the opposite sides of the line showed that the young female teachers distanced themselves too much from giving their own opinion about the profession and the school events they encounter, in relation to the men who wanted to hear positive evaluations and praise in mutual contacts and defend their rights in social situations, while fully exercising their rights as a condition of assertiveness. However, the young women teachers should learn the principles of assertive refusal and personal situations will gain unprecedented quality and meaning.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The areas of the greatest importance identified by the men were only seen by the women in the middle of the continuum. Therefore, these young professionals should be trained to include beneficial elements of building their own image, to learn how to interpret their own and others' behaviour, to give less critical appraisals, to better draw the right conclusions from the constructive criticism heard, leading to responsible activity, and to solve educational events and tasks. To this end, the informative value of the messages could be improved and guidance from others could be used - transforming their current behavior. In turn, the young male teachers could learn how to accept criticism in order to reduce this dominant area. Why is this the case for the subjects? Probably, because any opinion can be criticised and evaluated. The teacher does not want to be criticised, so he or she will avoid such

situations and will not be assertive in this respect. The other areas have less influence.

An important suggestion and advice for every young teacher can be the art of teaching and learning to give *feedback* as part of assertive behaviour. There are different models. One of them is a three-layer sandwich model, in which the conversation with the other person starts with positive information, then goes to negative information, and then to positive again. Another is the "Z" model, in which mutual contact also starts with the positive aspects and indication thereof, in order to give a negative opinion with its consequences and rational arguments. These two models presented can, in particular, be useful for the teacher who works in the difficult school environment. Using these models properly and learning the assertive principles will result in a good feedback based on readiness and respect. Trust in each other's understanding will be developed so that not only the teacher's activity improves, but also correct behaviour develops to strengthen self-confidence, expression of opinions, acceptance of praise and criticism, offering awareness of building a consensus at the same time. For this to happen, the research has shown in which areas change should occur. It is to be hoped that the teacher will undertake training in assertiveness and communication, which will initiate a sequence of beneficial transformations, reducing harmful influence and attitudes.

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