



SYNERGY AND ENVIRONMENT TO
EMPOWER DECENTRALISED SCHOOLS

TOOLKIT GREEN S.E.E.D.S.

MODULE 4 Seeds for Communicating

UNIT 1 Communication in educational settings



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UNIT 4.1

COMMUNICATION IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS: WITH FAMILIES, TEACHERS, STUDENTS. STRATEGIES AND GROUP DYNAMICS.

“To effectively communicate, we must realise that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.” (Tony Robbins, Author)

Communication is the keystone of family–school relations. Developing and maintaining communication that is genuine, meaningful, and encompasses dialogue is often hard to fully realise. Educational backgrounds, cultural differences in communication styles, beliefs, and values can shape the messages exchanged in the communication process. Through communication and dialogue, families and educators share information, realise each other main concerns, viewpoints, and priorities, and shape relationships that assist a child’s learning and welfare.

In this Unit, we will present to you some useful strategies and tips that can enhance the communication with parents, students and colleagues, making school-family interaction a valuable experience for all parties

involved. School–home communication is essential for inaugurating a robust school community. Positive communication can impact on family involvement and students’ academic performance. Therefore, practising and evolving your communication skills is vital for your professional life.

1. Which are the skills necessary for efficient communication?

Whether you are communicating with parents, colleagues or students, you will need to demonstrate a series of skills to ensure that your communication is appropriate and assists you in building strong relationships.

One of the essential communication skills is active listening. Being an active listener means that you are entirely concentrated on the person who speaks



at you, you maintain eye contact, you are observing his/her body language, showing that you are listening and that you understand by nodding your head, and remembering what has been said.

The second most important skill when communicating is your body language. Apart from using words, people interact with their facial expressions, hand, arm and leg gestures, and the tone of their voice. If you are rolling your eyes when a student makes a question what kind of message are you giving to that student? Imagine smiling to a pupil that has a stressful day or staring at a student who is not behaving well in the classroom. If you pay attention to the effect that your body language has on the students, the parents and colleagues you are talking with, you will realise the power of your non-verbal signs. Try to speak in front of a mirror and observe your body language. What would you change? What would you add?

Asking questions when having a dialogue shows that you are listening to the other person and you are interested to learn more. You can ask open-ended questions (starting with what or how) that will allow the other person to say more on the subject s/he is talking about; closed-ended questions (beginning with

Did, Do, Would, Will, Should, Could, Must, Have, Is) and specific ones (starting with When, Who, Which, Where, How much, How many, how often).

Showing empathy when listening to a parent means that you care about them, that you are there to support and work with them, that you can understand their place and feelings. Empathy is the heart of communication; it's the skill that will bring you closer with the people you are having a conversation. Being empathic towards your students creates a relationship of trust, understanding, and respect.

Finally, summarising what the other person has said, is a way to ensure that you have heard and understood correctly and shows that you were listening to his/her words.

Parents are not searching for a cold, professional attitude from school employees but for teachers who create a "personal approach" in their communication style. Practising the skills mentioned above will help you to establish close relationships with parents, colleagues and students. Being honest and authentic is the base of any interaction.

HOW CONFIDENT DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS? WE HAVE FOUND A QUIZ TEST FOR YOU TO EVALUATE YOUR SKILLS. WHY NOT GIVING IT A TRY! <https://www.practicalmentor.com/868/>

2. Barriers to communication

Many obstacles can affect the communication process. They can vary from physical ones to someone's perceptions. Usually, we don't pay attention to the physical barriers and we take them for granted. Some of them can be easily removed, though. For example, when you are having a meeting with the parents, you can have your mobile phones in silent mode. If the meeting is in the headmaster's office, you can also ask the secretary not to transfer phone calls or allow other visitors to enter the room. Physical barriers can affect your concentration to the speaker, and this might cause misunderstandings as you will not listen to all the details.

Another barrier to communication can be the words we choose and how we use them. A word we use might have a different meaning for someone else even if we come from the same culture or the same profession. So, we have to be specific and define the meaning of our words when it's necessary. Especially

with the parents, you will have to avoid the use of jargon. If you want to be understood by the parent, then you need to use words that people understand.

The communication process is also affected by our perceptions. Our experiences, backgrounds, values, needs, expectations, taboos and biases shape the way we see the world. They become the lenses through which we decode the messages we receive when we communicate. If the field of experiences between the sender and the receiver of a message is familiar, then their communication can flow smoothly. Otherwise, our expectations and prejudices may lead us to wrong assumptions and stereotyping.

Physical disabilities such as hearing loss, speech problems, blindness that can prevent someone from seeing the non-verbal signs, make the communication process unproductive.



Finally, cultural diversity makes communication hard as the mentality of people from different cultures can vary significantly; the language, signs and symbols, gestures are also different or can have another meaning which might be insulting in another culture. Culture also gives rise to prejudices, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. You will need to study the culture of your migrant students or colleagues to avoid misunderstandings.

3. How to communicate more effectively in written form with parents?

Epstein (2004) defines communicating with parents as one of six major types of parent involvement practices essential to creating robust functioning relationships between teachers and parents. Nurturing the teacher-parent relationship is also considered crucial for the advancement of schools as learning communities. Communication is not only the words you will say or write. It's also the impression you create and how you express your willingness to communicate and develop trustful relationships.

Communication in schools starts with the welcome sign that parents see when they first enter the building. If you have migrant students in your school, for

example, welcome signs in their ethnic languages create an even more inviting environment. Friendly, smiling, and pleasant office staff and teachers who are caring and ready to guide the parents when they visit the school instead of ignoring them can enhance the welcoming feeling and influence positively the parents towards the school. The cleanliness of the premises, decorating the walls with students' art creations, playing soft music during the breaks in the hallways are some more tips you can apply to your schools to create a "parent-friendly" atmosphere. Parents will value this approach and will be more open to discussions as they will consider that the school is genuinely interested in involving them in its efforts to support students' learning.

Concerning your written or one-way communication with parents, you can use a variety of sources such as introductory letter at the launch of the new school year, classroom or school news sheets, report cards, communication books, school website and social media. Written communication is deemed by researchers (Williams & Cartledge, 1977) as perhaps the most efficient and effective way for a continuing correspondence between the school and home.



Considering that written communication is a permanent creation, you will need to design its content and format very carefully. For your newsletters, for example, you should use the same colour, quality, and paper size for all newsletters to create a communication toolkit. The information contained should be accurate and concise, in an easy to understand language for the parents, ensuring no grammar and spelling mistakes. For new coming families to your community, you could add useful information to your first newsletter or create a specific leaflet.

School-to-home note pads are another frequently used written communication practice. Numerous teachers regularly use communication note pads to share information with parents, especially for students who have learning needs. Several authors (Davern, 2004; Williams & Cartledge, 1997) recommend strategies to improve the efficiency of communication books. First of all, you have to decide what kind of information you will communicate and how often. You should avoid the use of hard to understand educational terminologies and keep a balance of good and bad news. Using titles (such as Mr, Mrs., Ms.) brings out respect in the relationship. One or two weekly notes may be sufficient, as long as you have established regular communication with

the parents. Lastly, depending on the topic, it is essential to consider when a face-to-face meeting is more suitable than written notes.

Progress report cards are another source of written communication. Progress cards should be clear and easy for parents to understand, should provide an analysis of academic performance across school subjects, information about student's strong points and learning style, an assessment of the child's social development, specific learning objectives for the student to work on, and recommendations for the parent. You can also invite the parent to respond in written format. If you have some concerns for your student, it would be better to communicate this in advance to the parents and not use the Progress cards as your first communication.

You can be as creative as you wish with the communication tools you will use with the parents. An excellent idea which was tested at a school in the USA and was proved to be effective was the literacy bags (Grande, 2004). Teachers created for the first-grade students "literacy bags" to help parents understand what the students' expected learning achievements would be, and how they can support them with specific activities.



WHICH TOOLS ARE YOU USING IN YOUR SCHOOL TO COMMUNICATE IN WRITING WITH THE PARENTS? HOW WOULD YOU ADJUST THOSE TOOLS TO BE MORE CREATIVE?

4. How to improve your two-way communication with parents?

The main reason that teachers seek to communicate with a parent is to share the concerns they have about his/her academic performance or behaviour. It's rare for the teachers to contact parents to congratulate them for their child's success. Discussing difficult issues with the parents can be a source of anxiety for the teacher and can create tension in the relationship with the parents, especially if they are in denial. Establishing a trustful and cooperative relationship with the family from the beginning of the school year will help you later to share your worries with the parents and have their collaboration to address any problem.

A good idea would be to contact parents over the phone regularly as these phone communications can offer you valuable information about the students' life and possible difficulties that the family might be facing that hinder child's learning and performance. These calls can be an opportunity to compliment the student to

his parents for an excellent work s/he might have done in school. These positive phone calls set the ground for smooth cooperation when and if issues arise during the academic year. You don't have to speak for hours over the phone. Try to keep these calls brief and if it's needed, arrange a face to face meeting with the parents.

Other occasions for a dialogue with the parents can be the parent-teacher meetings. These meetings can be an opportunity to discuss the strengths of your student instead of focusing only on the weaknesses. You will need to prepare yourself in advance for this kind of consultations by reviewing the student's file carefully and setting specific goals for the discussion. We suggest you start your conversation with a friendly and informal way. In the beginning, you should stress the positive traits of the child, and then, you can refer to the issues that need attention. Make sure you will have enough time to discuss this part with the parents, listening to their comments and suggestions with great care and co-plan an intervention.



5. What is group dynamics? How can you improve the group dynamic in your classroom and communicate effectively with the students?

The term "group dynamics" is attributed to Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist in the early 1940s. He observed that when people work in a group, they often adopt different roles and behaviours. "Group dynamics" defines the special effects of these roles and behaviours on other group members, and the group as a whole.

When a group in your classroom has a positive dynamic you will find it easy to understand it as you will notice that the members of the team have faith in one another, they work for a mutual goal, and they consider one another

responsible for achieving the goal. Also, the students in that group will be twice as creative than in other groups in your class. In a group with defective group dynamics, students' behaviour interrupts the work, and the group might make wrong decisions because the members couldn't search alternative options efficiently, or it may not decide at all.

What is the reason behind lousy group dynamics? Usually, poor group dynamics are the result of the different roles that group members adopt. Some of the negative roles that students might take in the group are:

THE FIGHTER: THIS STUDENT WILL DISAGREE WITH OTHERS OR WILL SPEAK INAPPROPRIATELY

THE NEGATOR: THIS MEMBER WILL CRITICISE OTHER IDEAS

THE WITHDRAWER: WILL NOT PARTICIPATE IN THE DISCUSSIONS

THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SEEKER: THIS STUDENT WILL OVERSHADOW THE OTHER GROUP MEMBERS

THE CLOWN: WILL USE HUMOUR WHEN IT'S NOT NEEDED

Any of the above-mentioned negative roles can interrupt the flow of information in the group. Your role as a teacher is very crucial when forming the groups in your classroom as well as during the group exercise. You need to know very well the character and the

personality of your students in your class to place them with the right classmates in a group. Pay attention if any of the group members are behaving in a way that blocks the function of the team. If you notice such behaviour, act immediately by explaining to the student the



consequences of his/her actions for the team and ask the student to think of how s/he could change. There are several team-building exercises that you can use in the classroom to help your students develop a team spirit. You can find some on this website <https://www.weareteachers.com/team-building-games-and-activities/>

By defining from the beginning, the role and the responsibilities for each member in the group and the mission that the group has to accomplish will be very helpful for you and your students. You can create a “road map” for your teams with clear directions of what they will have to do, state the purpose of the group, how it will work, and what the expected results are. This way, your students will have a reference tool that will guide them through the activity they have to perform.

Excellent communication skills are the key to group work, as well. Cultivating communication principles in your classroom will assist your everyday work. You can set the paradigm by practicing and demonstrating your communication skills. You, as a teacher, can be the role model for the students to follow.

THERE ARE MANY COMMUNICATION EXERCISES YOU CAN TEST WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES. HERE IS ONE TO START WITH. ASK A COLLEAGUE TO SELECT A PICTURE OF A HOUSE. CHOOSE FOR YOURSELF ANOTHER PICTURE OF A HOME. DO NOT SHOW TO EACH OTHER THE IMAGES YOU HAVE CHOSEN. EACH OF YOU TAKES ONE BLANK PAPER SHEET AND THEN SIT BACK TO BACK ON TWO CHAIRS. NOW TRY TO DRAW EACH OTHER'S HOUSE BY ASKING QUESTIONS. ONCE YOU FINISH, SHOW EACH OTHER THE DRAWINGS AND SEE HOW CLOSE THEY ARE TO THE PICTURES YOU HAVE SELECTED. REFLECT ON THE QUESTIONS YOU HAVE ASKED. HOW MANY QUESTIONS DID YOU ASK? WAS THERE A QUESTION THAT WOULD HAVE HELPED THE PROCESS MORE? WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS DID YOU ASK? REFLECT ALSO ON THE ANSWERS YOU PROVIDED. HOW DETAILED AND ACCURATE WERE? HOW YOUR PERSPECTIVE INFLUENCED YOUR RESPONSES?



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