BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY CLUJ NAPOCA
FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENCE OF EDUCATION
PHD field: EDUCATION SCIENCES
PHD School: EDUCATION, REFLECTION, DEVELOPMENT

DOCTORAL THESIS

THE CONTRIBUTION OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE ACTIVITIES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE. APPLICATIONS TO STUDENTS FUTURE TEACHERS FOR PRIMARY AND PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

SUMMARY

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Cluj Napoca
2017

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Key terms: competence, communication, communication skills, didactic communication, communication competence, pedagogical practice, initial training, teacher for primary and preschool education, pedagogical practice teacher trainer.

Summary

PhD thesis titled *Contribution of pedagogical practice activities to the development of communication skills. Applications to students - future teachers for primary and preschool education* is structured on two dimensions. The first one refers to the theoretical foundations, and the second refers to the experimental approaches undertaken.

Starting from the study of the specialized literature, from Romania and abroad, in the first part of the paper we proposed:

• to analyze the theoretical aspects regarding the inter-human and didactic communication, the teaching staff communication competence;

• to identify strategies for developing the communication skills of students-future teachers for primary and preschool education through pedagogical practice activities;

• to suggest and recommend practical ways of developing the communication skills of students- future teachers for primary and preschool education.

In the first chapter, *Paradigmatic Approaches to inter-human, educational and didactic communication*, a brief history of interpersonal communication was presented, starting from the idea that over time communication in its many approaches and concepts constituted a fundamental area research for scientists such as: rhetoric, semiotics, linguistics, sociology, pedagogy, psychology, cybernetics, anthropology, politics and even mathematics. As a preamble to the theoretical delimitations of the term, this historian took into account the evolution and significance of the term communication from the diachronic perspective.Due to the fact that this phenomenon has been regarded as a fundamental element of human existence since the antiquity, elements of the theory of communication being present from the 6th century BC, we exposed the problem of definition of the concept, but also of the classifications of the forms of communication. Its importance is emphasized by the impossibility of inter-human relations in the absence of communication; In every life situation the person communicates, so the study of communication gives him various opportunities: to know, to know and to understand others, to establish personal and professional relationships that will contribute to the success of the two plans of human existence. At the same time, however, communication has become a constant source of controversy and confusion precisely because of the universal extension of the themes and topics circumscribed to the term, but also of research undertaken over time. Communication sciences are in the process of development, differentiation and crystallization, in most countries being integrated through multidisciplinary, pluridisciplinary

and transdisciplinary approaches in the family of social sciences alongside sociology, psychology, etc. It is certain that this phenomenon is a constantly evolving phenomenon, being re-conceptualized both at the level of the theoretical dimension and investigated at the level of the practical-applicative one because of the major changes existing in the modern society.

As a result of multiple research conducted in the field of inter-human communication, the definitions and attributes of communication are numerous. Due to the fact that the specialized literature details aspects regarding the difficulties of defining the term of communication, substituting the idea that even if apparently the definition of communication is an easy one, alongside the research of this field we found the difficulty of this approach due to the multitudes of opinions regarding the ways of approaching this process. In order to deal with this concept in detail, this thesis details the theories and patterns of communication, its forms and levels, and then focuses on communication in the educational environment. A taxonomy of specific criteria of communication has been proposed, according to the following: number of participants, communication channel, level of communication, context of communication, timeliness of action and forms of education accessible in the communication process.

If at the level of the interpersonal communication, the researches focused on the ways to improve the communication skills in order to communicate effectively in the field of communication in the educational environment, the works of the studied authors were an important support in the theoretical approaches taken: Marin Călin, Constantin Cucoş, Mihai Dinu, Vasile Dospinescu, Luminiţa Iacob, Ion-Ovidiu Pănişoară, Ştefan Prutianu, Constantin Săvăvăstru, Laurenţiu Şoitu. The theoretical and practical aspects addressed by them refer to effective strategies for improving communication at the level of teacher-student relationship. The importance of communication within the school environment is reflected in its role of assuring the efficiency of education, that is why we endorse the statement "Education is not limited to simple verbal communication, but it is a complex action, carried out by the general behavior of some relatively consolidated personalities on some personalities in training which, in case of its consumption in institutionalized environments, appears as a teacher-student relationship, educator-educated (teacher-trained). Educational action is a multidimensional communicative process. "(Apostol, 1969, p. 32 apud Saucan 2002). With regard to this type of communication, the themes related to the educational and didactic language and speech, the didactic communication, the blockages and the factors that determine the communication difficulties, as well as the strategies for diminishing them, have been approached.

The second chapter, *Theoretical prerequisites for developping communication and relational competence,* presents the definitions and taxonomies of the concept of competence, according to the official documents in force based on the Law of National Education 1/2011. In order to ensure the effectiveness of communication in the educational environment, the teacher

should refer to a series of professional standards in which didactic communication is a criterion of increased interest. Due to the fact that the existing standards have not been updated since 2002, the professional standards specific to the teacher for primary education were designed based on 7 analysis criteria: child knowledge, professional training, activity planning, development of the educational process, progress and school performance assessment, professional development and career advancement, communication and relationship with students and social community members. This theoretical-applicative approach can be a starting point in developing new standards at the level of primary education in Romania. In their elaboration, we considered an operational definition of *didactic competence*, which is represented by a *system of cognitive, affective-emotional, motivational, psychosocial, managerial and behavioral knowledge, capacities and abilities that interact with the personality traits of the teaching staff, determining effective implementation of specific teaching approaches and positive behavior on the part of the pupils.*

Part of teaching competence, communication competence is the key concept of our thesis. It refers to:

• the ability to use vertical and horizontal competence;

• demostrating empathic abilities

• the ability to access various sources of information in order to know the disciplinary content of disciplines;

• the ability to design and carry out activities specific to the learning process as a communication act;

• the capacity to carry out educational partnership projects, involving school, family and local community.

Referring to the educational communication and the implicit didactic communication, the most important aspects have been specified regarding their efficiency. The competence of communication being one of the most important professional competences specific to the teaching career its role in the initial formation of future teachers for primary and preschool education was delineated in Chapter III, *Pedagogical practice, effective way of developing competences for the teaching career*. It was considered necessary to present the objectives of the pedagogical practice and the general and specific competences pursued, as well as the ways of organizing and carrying out the pedagogical practice activities in pre-school and primary education institutions, focusing also on the coaching relations established at the level of the coordinating teacher –teacher trainer-student. Because of the importance of this relationship in terms of forming teaching skills and abilities, we have explained a number of practical ways

through which it can be developed, as well as strategies for engaging communication skills in cooperative learning.

The experimental approach presented starting with chapter IV was based on the study of some important bibliographic ressources whose category also comprised, alongwith theoretical materials, studies conducted in Romania and abroad.

Starting from the research prerequisite, from the theoretical and methodological landmarks of my own experimental pathway, I formulated the following general research hypothesis: *Implementation of a psycho-pedagogical intervention program focused on the communication needs of the practicing students during pedagogical practice activities and the assessment and self-assessment sessions of communicative behavior contributes significantly to increasing the development level of communication competence.*

The specific assumptions of the research were:

Involvement of students in pedagogical practice activities focussed on topics related to communication skills produces significant positive effects at the level of communication and relational competence development.

The effective combination of learning-specific strategies through co-operation with learning methods based on oral and written communication determines the development of the communication behavior of practising students.

Starting from the formulation of the general hypothesis, the following variables were established for the experiment:

The independent research variable represented by the psycho-pedagogic intervention program consists of:

• organizing and carrying out activities in the experimental didactic workshops, according to the previously established themes;

• carrying out pedagogical practice activities in preschool and primary education institutions;

• asessment / self-assessment sessions, respectively observation / self-observation of the communication behavior of students- future teachers for primary and preschool education.

The dependent research variables targeted:

• the level of development of written communication;

• the level of development of nonverbal communication;

• level of development of paraverbal communication;

• the level of development of active listening;

• the level of development of addressing questions;

• the level of empathy development;

• the level of communication competence development.

The sample of subjects involved in the research consisted of 48 students of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, the third year of study from Năsăud University Extension and 40 students from Tîrgu Mureş University Extension.

The experimental approach comprised three stages: the pretest stage, the formative experiment stage and the posttest stage.

At the pretest stage at the level of the two groups of students was applied a grid for the analysis of the communication abilities manifested in the pedagogical practice activities. This was conceived by us because the instruments validated by the literature were not relevant to the specificity of the research. The grid included a series of 29 statements, such as behavioral anchor grids that referred to observable indicators derived from communication skills. In order to ensure the validity of the instrument we have tried to implement it. As a result of the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained, we have made changes to the content, both qualitatively and quantitatively. In order to validate each other, we have developed an evaluation grid for the students' communicative behavior, which has been supplemented by pedagogical practice teacher trainers. After analyzing and interpreting the results obtained at this stage, we conclude that:

• The self-perceived level of development of the communication skills of the practising students, correlated with its appreciation by pedagogical practice teacher trainers, is approximately identical, which determines the mutual validation of the instruments. Thus, students with a very good / good / medium / low / very low level of communication competence development have been appreciated by pedagogical practice teacher trainers as being at this level.

• Knowing the level of development of communication skills indicates a good assessment and appreciation of their own communication skills.

The pretest stage provided valuable data for carrying out the formative experiment. After analyzing and interpreting the data, it was found that there are no significant differences at the level of dependent variables (oral communication, written communication, nonverbal communication, paraverbal communication, active listening, questioning, empathy and communication competence) between the two groups, the experimental and control groups. These data were determined by the fact that the students are at the same initial stage of training. Thus, all the objectives, contents and competences that are intended to be formed through pedagogical practice are identical, the differences being those related to the approach. Consequently, the results obtained indicated that it is necessary to develop the communication and relational competence of students-future teachers for primary and preschool education in the case of 43 students from the experimental group.

Given the complexity of the communication topic, we opted for structuring an experimental intersubject approach combined with quantitative and qualitative intragrupal analyzes. Thus, in the intrasubject studies, due to the design proposed by the experimental approach initiated by us, at the end of each theme approached in the stage of the formative intervention, we had the opportunity, through specific measurements, to identify elements of evolution that allowed us to draw conclusions, which altogether with final data would support the validation of the specific assumptions initially established.

The program designed for this purpose was carried out according to the proposed plan. The number of participating students varied between 40 and 48, all absence being justified. Those who were absent received the informative materials related to the topic. The duration of each activity ranged from 90 to 120 minutes, depending on variables such as: the complexity of the topic approached, the nature of the activities carried out, the effectiveness of the practical activities, the students' disposition and the number of participating subjects. The themes of the activities were circumscribed to the communication and relational competence, implicitly to the communication skills approached at the theoretical, methodological and practical level. We considered it useful to introduce activities related to the role of cooperative learning, drama art, outdoor communication and emotional communication in the development of communication and relational competence as contemporary pedagogy highlights their importance in developing teacher competencies. These themes constituted novelty elements for students due to the theoretical approach presented, but especially to the practical steps taken. Students have been very involved in the activities organized proving creativity, empathy, emotional communication, and adaptability to unpredictable situations.

Thus, in order to assess the extent to which the introduction into the program of learning activities centered on communication skills has significant positive effects on the level of communication and relational competence development, quantitative data were analyzed. As a result of the completion of the instruments from the formative experimental stage, found in annexes, a constant increase during the formative intervention was noted. The data thus obtained were relevant to supporting the validity of the first specific hypothesis formulated.

The effectiveness of the intervention program activities was observed at the end of each activity in terms of observable indicators as a result of its continuous assessment: enriching knowledge on the topics covered, developing practical and intellectual skills, increasing the level of skills development, changing attitudes to learning, to pedagogical practice and to pupils. The evaluation was done through oral questionnaire, written examination, but also by the alternative method of the portfolio. The latter were conscientiously drawn by students, being an important source of information on practical ways of developing communication and relational competence.

The overall conclusion is that during the experimental approach, in the context of exercising the communication skills in the pedagogical practice, but also in the activities carried out within the experimental workshops, a significant development of the communication and relational competence has taken place. Thus, by analyzing the results obtained during the formative intervention, and by the comparative pretest and posttest analysis at the level of the experimental group, the truth value of the research assumptions is verified.

Beyond the statistical validation of the overall and the specific hypotheses formulated, the application of the communication competence development program has demonstrated that the program activities have contributed to the development of team work skills. Cooperative learning has been a good exercise to support the views of the group, to combat ideas, but also to argue with one's own opinions. Discussion of reasoning and the construction of group cohesion have been considered effective cooperative exercises.

The final stage of the experimental design was aimed at the comparative monitoring of the level of communication skills development as a result of the introduction of the independent variable in order to confirm the proposed hypotheses. This comparison was made at the level of the two groups in both pretest and posttest stages. Thus, the data obtained as a result of applying the initial grid to the experimental and control groups, in order to carry out the correlation study for the validation of the obtained data, we asked the pedagogical practice teachers trainers to complete the assessment grids during the exploratory period.

The analysis and interpretation of data obtained at the intergroup and intragroup level at pretest / pretest, pretest / posttest, posttest / posttest level leads to the following conclusions:

- In the pretest period, the level of communication skills as well as communication competence development of students-future teachers for primary and preschool education in both groups is similar, and there is no significant difference from this point of view. The level of development of each communication skill but also that of communication competence is at a very high level for 7 students out of the total of 88, which implies the need to implement a communication and student relations competence development program.
- The themes approached in the psycho-pedagogic intervention program addressed communication skills, cooperative learning, emotional communication, theatrical art in teaching, as well as communication in the outdoor environment. We have chosen to deal with these topics, in addition to those relating to communication skills, because:

- Cooperative learning requires permanent communication, all communication skills being thus practiced.
- The approach of a teaching style which includes emotional communication determines the efficiency of didactic activity. Students have demonstrated behavior specific to the teacher having emotional culture, aware of the importance of knowing and applying the characteristic principles in practice.
- The use of theatrical improvisation exercises in instructive-educational activities determines the development of abilities of: paraverbal communication, non-verbal communication and oral communication. At the same time, the pupils' attention is drawn, their interest for activity is cultivated, being stimulated to use such exercises in their activity.
- Communication in the outdoor environment refers to the use of a specific teaching language, which is why the students were involved in such activities for the purpose of knowing and applying it in their future profession.

• As a result of quantitative and qualitative data analysis, we can conclude the following:

- The communication competence of students- future teachers for primary education benefited from a significant increase in the level of development as a result of the implementation of the psycho-pedagogical intervention program. Thus, the data obtained, the *t* value of 10,381, the averages of 66,21 and 78,06 and the standard deviation of 6,17 in both stages support the efficiency of the program.
- As regards the evaluation of the communication and relational competence by pedagogical practice teacher trainers, pretest-posttest comparisons in the experimental group show that the posttest environments are significantly statistically higher than the pretest averages for all the dependent variables taken into account, with a correlation between the self-assessed level and the one evaluated by teacher trainers.
- At the level of the experimental group, the communication competence is significantly higher than in the control group, the value of the variable *t* is of 7,388 and the average difference of 7,84 at a significance threshold $p < 0,01$. This indicates the effectiveness of the program proposed by us at the level of the experimental group, proving that the involvement of students in

activities that aim at the development of communication and relation skills, where theory and practice combine is necessary.

- Pretest-posttest comparisons in the control group revealed the following results: For the variables related to oral communication, written communication, questioning and communication skills (self-assessment), the post-test environments are significantly higher than the pretest averages due to the listed factors. For variables related to active listening, empathy, non-verbal communication and paraverbal communication, the post-test environments do not differ statistically significantly from those in the pretest.
- In the posttest, the average for the "written communication development level" variable evaluated in the experimental group did not differ significantly from the average for this variable evaluated in the control group. For all other variables, the averages in the experimental group are statistically significantly higher than those in the control group.

On the basis of the theoretical analyzes, as well as those of the results obtained during and after the experimental steps taken, a series of final conclusions can be made regarding the theoretical and experimental approaches undertaken:

- Students' knowledge of the main categories of teacher-specific skills will determine the continuous reporting of their activities in these categories, in order to train and develop these skills.
- Developing students' communication skills is a topic of high interest in initial training due to the importance of educational and didactic communication in ensuring professional success, along with the other competencies needed by a teacher.
- Reporting future teachers for primary and preschool education to a range of professional standards is essential to ensure the quality of the instructive-educational process.
- Pedagogical practice occupies a very important place in initial teacher training, so organizing, conducting and evaluating them must be of high quality.
- In order to develop professional skills, in general, and communication and relation skills in particular, it is necessary to implement a specific program of psycho-pedagogical intervention within which topics related to educational and didactic communication should be approached.
- The program implemented by us proved to be an efficient one due to the topics approached, the way of organizing the experimental workshops, but also due to its applicability

in the activities of knowledge teaching, capacities, skills and abilities formed alongside. The results obtained also support its effectiveness.

• We consider that such a program could be a starting point for proposing a new educational discipline, at the level of optional discipline, *Education for Communication*, at the level of a semester of study.

• Regarding the limits of this approach, we believe that the psycho-pedagogic intervention program could be streamlined by introducing other topics of interest and by making more practical applications, according to the specificity of the group to which it applies, but also other principles proposed by the one who carries it out. Also, the number of subjects participating in the study and implicitly in the experiment may be higher, but given the complexity of the program, we think it was relevant to the samples making it possible to generalize the data to higher samples.

• In addressing such a research topic, errors may frequently occur among investigated subjects such as:

- Participants are not always sincere in their responses, an attitude that hampers intervention at the level of the experimental group;

- providing responses within the limits of social desirability, influenced by what the researcher accepts and wants;

- the phenomenon of reactivity, which makes a person conscious of being observed to adopt a different behavior than normal.

The entire theoretical and research approach has sought to provide support points for conceptualizing and conducting an effective and systematic educational intervention in the sense of developing communication skills for primary and preschool education future teachers.

In order to establish new research directions, we consider that the following aspects can be specified:

• implementation of intervention programs focusing on communication competence, combined with other categories of professional competences, starting with the second year of study;

• creating teams of specialists in the field of Educational Sciences and Theatrical Art in order to develop a more complex program;

• comparative analysis of communication and relation competence of students from several universities with the specialization of Primary and Preschool Education Pedagogy.

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