

COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE GROUP OF STUDENTS. OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE STRUCTURE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE COMMUNICATIVE BALANCE

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Abstract

The study presents the findings of some observations on how communication is structured within the group of students in the initial stage of building the classroom as a social group, and how this structure evolves during the educational process. The communication behaviors of students in the first grade of primary education (pupils aged 6/7) are analysed. The most general finding is that, although the group of children is in the initial stage, there obviously is a natural tendency to set up their communication circuits fast enough, even if later on the first configuration will prove fragile and will be remodeled. Based on this finding, the study addresses some pedagogical aspects of communication within the group of students.

Keywords: communication, group of students, communicative balance

1. Introduction

The starting point of this study is the findings of some comments on how to structure communication in the group of students in the initial stage of forming the classroom as a social group, namely the class of primary school (pupils aged 6 / 7) in the first weeks of school. Our intention was to see how students in a new formed class communicate in a non-formal context in the absence of the teacher, during the break or before the start of classes, as students arrive to school. In order that our presence should not be detected by students, we used the physical configuration of the classroom, which allowed us to observe from behind a window without being seen by students. Observations were made in the internship program conducted by students at the master's degree program - *Psycho-pedagogy of early education*.

Subsequently, we have extended our observations at the initial stage, the intermediate stage during the school year, with the intention to refer to the developments in the structure of communication in the group of students under the influence of education. We have also extended the observations and groups (classes) of older students. Based on these observations, but also of practical educational experiences, the study addresses some of the valences of

pedagogical communication and communicative balance in the group of students.

2. Structuring communication within the group of students

By observing the communication behavior of students, the first impression was that of a somewhat chaotic distribution of transmitting and receiving messages, interventions and responses that one or another of the students. Each new student that came to class or left the class temporarily changed things, some students unexpectedly break into the conversation while others give up and retire to their desks.

But continuing the observation for 10-15 minutes, I found that gradually the students acquire communication acts a certain configuration, and if we plot this *configuration* we get something like a sociogram. In fact, this configuration reflects a certain visible *structure of group communication* that shows how to initiate and organize communication acts regarded as *group interactions*. By way of illustration, we present in Fig. 1 the simplified version (there were only retained typical situations) communication structure observed in Class I (urban school) in the second week of school before the start of classes (the teacher was asked to delay a few minutes at the first class). The class was chosen from among those whose students come mostly from kindergarten or different preschool groups, our intention being to reduce the effect of the transfer structure that influences the preschool group.

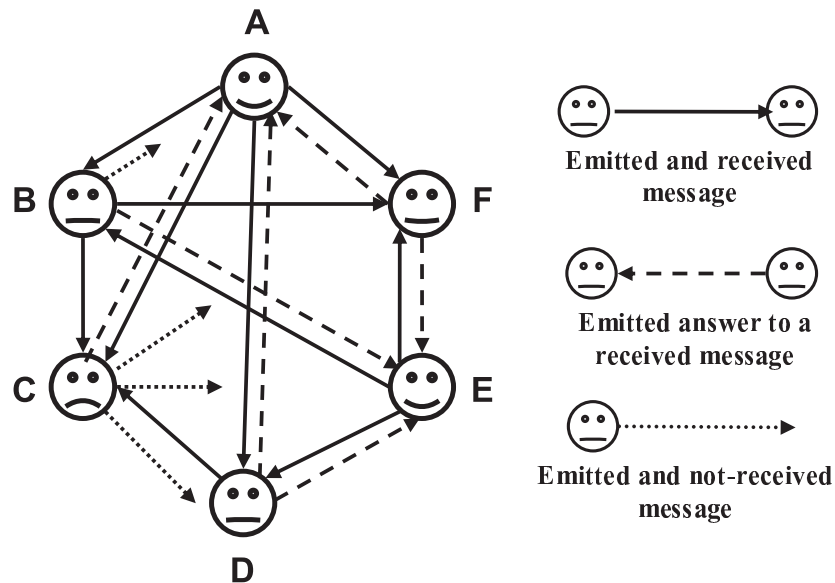


Fig. 1 - Structure of group communication

The first finding that permits inspection of the figure no. 1 is that, although the group of children is in the initial stage and most students do not know and have never interacted in the new configuration of the group (class I), it is obvious *a natural tendency to group structure communication circuits fast enough*, even after the first configuration will prove fragile and will be remodeled. This trend of structuring the communication is maintained throughout the operation of the group, with the proviso that, gradually, as the formation of the group formation of psychosocial intersect it sometimes interferes (both factor and effect) to other structures within the group (preferential relations structure, of the influence and authority) which confirms that *the communication takes place against the background of group interactions*, forming a phrase or support these interactions. For example, students who turn out good communicators tend to acquire a good position in the relations of power and authority (they are listened to and followed by others). From the other direction, students gain a better position in the structure of relations of power and authority (e.g. due to good school performance) tend to gain a privileged communication within the relationships.

A second finding that enables our observations is that *students / children spontaneously communicate in various ways from the moment of their coexistence in the group* without needing the intervention of a facilitator or moderator (as is often the case in adults). Regarding specific issues reflected by the structure shown in Fig 1, one can make the following comments:

- obviously, student A is the leader of the group communication; he emits four messages and receives three reactions from the fourth response (from student B) no longer perceived, because it is busy issuing / receiving other messages;

- student E also holds a very good position that maintains mutual relations of communication with three colleagues who probably know each other from the nursery school or from home;

- a special situation arises if student C who receives three messages but one answer, however emits three messages that do not reach the recipients or are not received by them. Typical is the case of the student who "talks but does not listen to anybody" and yet continues to talk. It is possible that it derives from a group of preschoolers who have a good communicator position, the current situation is just a step in adapting to the new group.

It is interesting that we have identified a structure almost similar to that of Fig. 1 at the beginning of 5th grade class and 9th grade and the first year of college, which justifies the conclusion that the structure of group communication is conducted by relatively general rules. Extending the observations regarding the relations communication content and forming messages were possible we have reached some interesting findings:

- those group members who fail to send messages of general interest acquire positions of leadership communication;

- those who know how to prepare the communication circuit prior to the characterization of the message that they will send fail to be listened to. For example, in the group of students (class IX) the one who managed to be listened to was the student, after two unsuccessful attempts, said "You do not want to listen, no problem, but you'll be sorry";

- students who know how to exploit contrasts manage to become leaders, that is those who speak loudly when others speak slowly and speak slowly when others speak loudly, or they go back there and talk to the class when they want to impose more in the class.

3. The communicational valence of the group

From the moment we aim to stimulate and capitalize group communication we must ask what and how much can be communicated through and within the group, what the possibilities and the limits of group communication are. In order to accomplish the *communicative valence* concept is very useful. Introduced by Y. Friedman [1] and R. Escarpit [2], the term valence refers to *the number of individuals with whom an individual can communicate directly over a period of time*. Translated in terms of group communication, communicative valence means:

- *while emitting*, the number of members of the group to which a member may issue messages that might produce influences (reactions).

- *while receiving*, the number of members of the group to which a group member can influence message that might produce influences (reactions).

As R. Escarpit [2] noted, this report recognizes the fundamental *information / time* and we also add (referring to the group communication) the important report of the members of a group and the number of possible communication acts for each group member. In this regard, it is important to note *that group communication possibilities are limited* and that, therefore, in a given period of time, the chances of each member to participate in communication resulting from the combination of the process of communication and the number of group members are also limited. These highlights are important because, when assessing teaching methods based on group communication (conversation, debate etc.) it is also revealed that a disadvantage of these methods that involve time-consuming a small amount of information effectively conveyed and assimilated by students. Typically, these evaluations fail, however, that the time required size interactive communication group in a given volume of information depends directly proportional to the size of the group of students. But as a communication process do not exceed certain limits, when these limits are exceeded two phenomena may occur:

- Whether the (too) big group splits into small groups each performing their own communication circuit, so that the large group of issuance processes occur simultaneously (talking once more, each trying to "conquer" its listeners), which is in fact a breakup of the group in which you made the initial communication;

- whether a part of group members waive or refuse to participate in the act of communication (both at inception and at reception), which is in fact a temporary reduction of the number of real members of the group, ie bringing the size of the group to the necessary dimension imposed during communication.

Both phenomena are negative, both in terms of communication and group cohesion plan and certainly plan to achieve educational objectives pursued by the group communication. Within educational groups, these phenomena are particularly evident, and the teacher can take action to mitigate them, in two ways:

- Determining the optimum number of members in the group and participating in group communication (communication is preferably a small group, but interactive and open to all members of a communication "table", but they leave out a significant number of students);

- Setting judiciously during group communication, based on the number of students that make up the group and the possibilities of their mental support while the act of communication.

In this regard, it is considered ideal for effective communication that the group should be formed of 5-7 members and may not exceed 14 to 16 members, the limit beyond which the phenomena mentioned above begin to manifest. Naturally, this is an ideal group size, it cannot be guaranteed in all circumstances, so that teachers have the task of establishing "centers of interest" in group communication and organize communication in small groups to allow participation of all the students. If, however, there is the possibility of organizing smaller class groups, then the solution is to limit the amount of information (knowledge) to an amount affordable by the communication group (class). *Adapting to the knowledge on classroom sizes, given the duration of the lesson is inextensible, is an essential condition to the effectiveness of teaching methods based on group communication.*

4. The communicative balance within the group

Observing the actual situation of a communication group, we find that participation in the act of communication of group members is uneven, some being more active, "aggressive", others are more passive, more secluded. In education, these situations are not only obvious, but also very common. Concrete situations depend on the individual characteristics of each student

(temperament, skills, traits of character) and how the group organizes communication. Often, the dynamics of participation reflects the very dynamic "natural" interactions within the group, preferential relations, authority, the inter-influence occurring within the group. To grasp the distinction in participation in communication we will use the concept of communicative balance of each group member. (With relatively similar meanings, Y. Friedman [1] uses the term *balance of influences* and R. Escarpit [2] *Information on the balance sheet*).

For the purposes of this study we use, *communicative balance is the algebraic sum of the influences that each individual carries (the act of issuing, ranked by +) the influences it receives (the act of perception, rated to -)*. For example, if a student receives 3 issue 4 posts and messages, its balance is positive and equal to 1 ($4-3 = 1$). If you deliver two messages, but receive 4 then the balance sheet is negative and equal to -2 ($2-4 = -2$). Of course, while the act of issuing can be easily recorded, the act of perception is less obvious and this record is uncertain. Therefore, we consider only the received message that generates a response message (verbal or nonverbal) of the subject. If the balance is equal between the communicative group members, the group is *egalitarian*, if unevenly when the group is *hierarchized*. Schematically, the two groups are shown in Fig. 2. In this figure, the arrows indicate influences and not mere issuance of messages in that message generates a certain reaction, response, an effect on communication behavior of others.

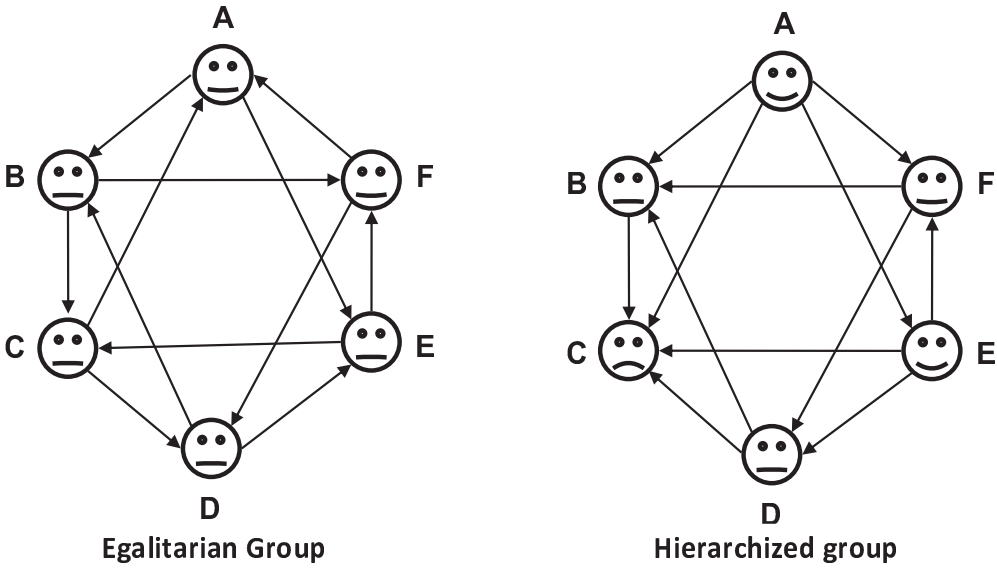


Figure. 2. The communicative balance

In the egalitarian group, the positions of the members (e.g. students of a class) are the same, communication is "democratic", each member having equal opportunities to deliver messages and thus influence the behavior of others. It should be stressed that the situation of a perfectly egalitarian group is rare because in the process of group formation, naturally occurring hierarchies, there appear leaders, some students gaining a central position, while others are "marginalized". Therefore, the establishment of an egalitarian communication relationship type involves direct or indirect in the sense directing teacher relations communication for each student to participate actively, as issuer, and not only as a receiver of information.

The group hierarchy, members are unequal positions, organized by levels of influence so that information and communication circuits tend to focus like a pyramid, with a maximum balance communicative leader or group leaders.

The actual process of education and as students know, the phenomenon of hierarchy of groups of students is very evident and necessary. It is important to know and to directly influence the convergence with the objectives of education, norms and values that generate the hierarchy. Moreover, real social life continually generates hierarchies and social structures demands habituation between students.

Each of the two configurations of communication - egalitarian and hierarchical - has both advantages and disadvantages. The teacher must coordinate group to group one type or another, depending on the objectives and of the specific teaching and learning.

But he/she should bear in mind that the option for one type or another depends on *the group size*. An egalitarian group cannot be too high. The optimal number is 4-5 members, and over 12 members there have already been recorded phenomena of loss of balance of equal communicational (students who do not have the opportunity to intervene in communication). The communication time required for full egalitarian communication overlaps the physical opportunities for communication (attention is reduced and reception does not occur).

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