

Communication Strategies for Parents and the Community involvement at Integrated Special Education School

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ABSTRACT: *This research is based on quantitative survey and qualitative study. The objective of this research is to encourage the involvement of parents at school through communication activities. The research was carried out in two phases whereby the qualitative study involved 12 administrators from 4 Integrated Special Education Programme (PPKI) schools in Peninsular Malaysia as research samples, selected via purposive sampling. Meanwhile, the quantitative study involved research respondents comprising 466 teachers and administrators from 200 randomly selected PPKI schools. Interviews were carried out to collect qualitative data, while the Epstein survey instrument was utilised to discover the perception of administrators and teachers regarding communication activities at school. On the whole, findings from the quantitative study revealed that the level of implementation of communication activities at PPKI schools in Peninsular Malaysia is considerably high. Through the overall findings, four schools were identified with the highest mean. Besides that, the qualitative study showed that the schools successfully implemented effective communication due to the following themes: i) listening skills, ii) oral skills, iii) conflict management and iv) interactive skills. Through these four themes, the schools managed to engage the interest and cooperation of parents in aiding the students' development. Through research findings, it is hoped that the objective of the research will be fulfilled, that is to assist PPKI schools in encouraging the involvement of parents via communication skills. It can also expedite policy makers, school administrators and the Ministry of Education in improving communication activities which have been identified as the key propeller for parents' involvement at school.*

Keywords: *Communication, parents' involvement, community, success of school*

I. INTRODUCTION

Realising the need to enhance the quality of national education, the Ministry of Education Malaysia has identified the best strategy to achieve the objective. The Government has affirmed that learning is not confined to school compounds only and should also take place at home and in the community. As such, schools should create a conducive environment so that positive rapport can be established between the school, the parents and the community (Education Development Master Plan 2013-2023 [1]). The Ministry of Education strives to provide guidance on engaging the involvement of parents and the community at school. In this matter, the Ministry has outlined several objectives that need to be implemented in order to gain cooperation from parents and the community. Among them is getting parents to become associates in the effort to increase the achievements of their children. To attract support from the local community, the school should seek voluntary participation from intercommunity organisations for various services which can benefit the school and local students.

To achieve this, the internal factors of the school should be given utmost attention, as stated by Moles et al. (2006 [2]). Among these is the role of teachers who often liaise with the parents of the students. Teachers are required to enhance their knowledge and skills, especially communication skills with parents, to provide high quality service as educators as well as acting as the link between the school and parents. The teaching profession cannot be taken as an easy job as it requires quality, competence, wisdom, qualification, interest and commitment. It is not a profession for simply anyone (Education Development Master Plan [1]).

Communication is the best strategy to encourage the involvement of parents and the community. The characteristics of an excellent teacher, in terms of communication skills, include possessing superior communication skills and having the capability to convey ideas and messages effectively in diverse situations. An excellent teacher is considered the pioneer in an effort and one who successfully interacts either via writing or speech (Excellent Teacher Concept 2004). In carrying out effective communication, according to Turnbull et al. (2006 [3]), the teacher must be patient and understanding of the parents' problems. Besides that, according to Friend & Cook (2007 [4]), the teacher should use easily understood language that suits the culture and ethnic.

Nonetheless, a study by Norshidah et al. (2001 [5]) revealed that the level of involvement is still low among parents at special education schools. Research findings by Caplan (2000 [6]) are also parallel to local research.

Caplan (2000 [6]) states that when communication conflict arises between the school and parents, it dampens the interest of the parents and the community to work together with the school. This could be due to the teachers' negative perception towards the important role of parents and lack of understanding pertaining to their communication style. According to Baker (2000 [7]), such attitude leads to conflict between parents and teachers. When problems involving students arise, their parents will put the blame on the teachers and vice versa. The school, on the other hand, does not provide enough support for the teachers to improve their communication skills. Conley (2004 [8]) reveals that staff are often undertrained to collaborate with parents. To help improve communication skills among teachers, this research was carried out to assist administrators in planning activities which can enhance effective communication skills among namely PPKI teachers, as it is clear that parents and the community play a vital role in student intervention. One who possesses communication skills is capable of influencing others and effective communication strategies can produce numerous successes (Guerrero & Floyd 2006 [9]).

Communication acts as the main impetus to enable teachers to attract the interest of parents and the community (Lawson 2003 [10]). In this matter, both types of communication – oral and non-oral – should be given emphasis by all teachers. Both have to be considered as a complete unit, inseparable and integrated to convey a particular message (Mohd. Safar & Fatimah 1988 [11]). In discussing communication issues, numerous effective communication theories were featured by Western researchers and can be made the platform for discussion. Among the models compatible with this research is the effective listening model by McNoughton et al, 2008 [12]). This is explained via Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. LAFF don't CRY strategy: Steps in listening skills

Abbreviation	Activity
L (<i>Listen</i>)	Listen, have empathy and appreciate
A (<i>Ask</i>)	Ask questions and seek permission
F (<i>Focus</i>)	Focus on the issue
F (<i>Find</i>)	Seek initial step
Don't	
C (<i>Criticize</i>)	Criticize parents who are absent
R (<i>React</i>)	React impulsively and promise something intangible
Y (<i>Yakety-yak</i>)	Complicate the situation

Blue Banning et al. (2004 [13]) explained the importance of listening skills among teachers. According to Blue Banning et al. (2004[13]), teachers do not possess enough information regarding their students, especially special needs students. They will be able to gain such information from parents through listening skills.

In short, communication and collaboration strategies may encourage the involvement of parents and the community at school (Pugah and Johnson 2002 [14]). However, the implementation of collaboration culture at school is considered a personal advantage, and there is yet a global standard to reinforce such culture in all schools (Barth 2006 9[15]); Conley et al. 2004[8]); Wood & Weasmer 2002 [16]).

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research aims to realise the objectives of KPM to encourage the participation of parents and the community at school through the communication skills of the teachers. To achieve the objectives, three research questions were adduced:

1. What is the implementation level of communication between school, parents and the community in Special Education Integrated schools (PPKI) in Peninsular Malaysia?
2. What are the important elements in practising the best collaboration with parents and the community at school?
3. In terms of communication, how are the practices of the teachers able to influence the level of involvement of parents and the community at school?

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was carried out in two phases, beginning with the quantitative phase by using the Epstein questionnaire instrument relating to communication activities. It was administered among 466 teachers and administrators in 200 PPKI schools in Peninsular Malaysia. They were selected based on stratified zones whereby the Eastern Zone consisted of Terengganu, Kelantan and Pahang, the Central Zone consisted of Perak, Selangor, Federal Territory of Putrajaya and Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, while the Southern Zone consisted of Johor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka and the Northern Zone consisted of the states Kedah, Perlis and Pulau Pinang. Next, the qualitative phase was administered, involving 12 administrators comprising head teachers and assistant head teachers (academic) from four schools representing each zone as interview respondents. Purposive sampling was carried out to obtain qualitative and quantitative research samples. The researcher identified four schools which successfully implemented effective communication, known as S1, S2, S3 and S4 via quantitative data. Meanwhile, qualitative data was collected to explore the communication practices among teachers at S1-S4 via sharing of experience by the administrators and teachers. Qualitative data was analysed using the Nvivo 0.8 software to seek theme constancy related to quality communication practices. Meanwhile, quantitative data was analysed using the SPSS 11.5 programme whereby descriptive statistics were used to explain the mean and standard deviation for the level of implementation of communication activities at school.

IV. RESULTS

What is the implementation level of communication between school, parents and the community in PPKI primary schools in Peninsular Malaysia?

Quantitative research findings based on the questionnaire instrument revealed that the implementation level of communication activities at PPKI schools in Peninsula Malaysia is high with a mean of 3.62 to 3.88. This is clarified in Table 2 as follows.

Table II: Overall findings of level of communication activities

Southern Zone		Central Zone		Eastern Zone		Northern Zone	
SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean
0.58	3.76	0.59	3.65	0.73	3.62	0.66	3.88

Based on the findings, the researcher could identify four schools with the highest level of communication activities from each zone. Four primary PPKI schools known as Eastern Zone School, Central Zone School, Southern Zone School and Northern Zone School achieved the highest mean based on the perspective of administrators and teachers at the schools. In short, the mean for each school is as stated in Table 3.

Table III: Highest level of communication activities for four schools

Southern Zone School			Central Zone			Eastern Zone School			Northern Zone School		
Adm Teacher Mean			Adm Teacher Mean			Adm Teacher Mean			Adm Teacher Mean		
4.0	5.0	4.5	4.9	4.4	4.65	4.71	4.93	4.8	4.9	5.0	4.9

Adm: Adiministrator

Based on the quantitative research findings, four schools were identified as research samples in the second phase. In this qualitative phase, the researcher carried out interviews with administrators and teachers to explore the schools' success factors in terms of communication activities in getting the cooperation of parents and the community at school. The interview analysis showed four main themes related to communication activities which have been implemented by the schools and this is as described in Figure 1.

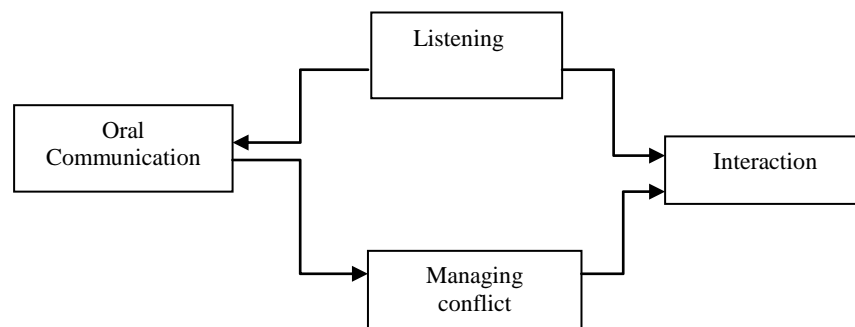


Figure 1: Four main themes related to best communication skills

Another research objective is to provide detailed explanation regarding practices implemented by the school to establish communication activities through sharing of experience by teachers and administrators at four selected schools. On the whole, a total of 20 subthemes were obtained through the interview analysis using the Nvivo programme. This is pictured in Figures 2 below.

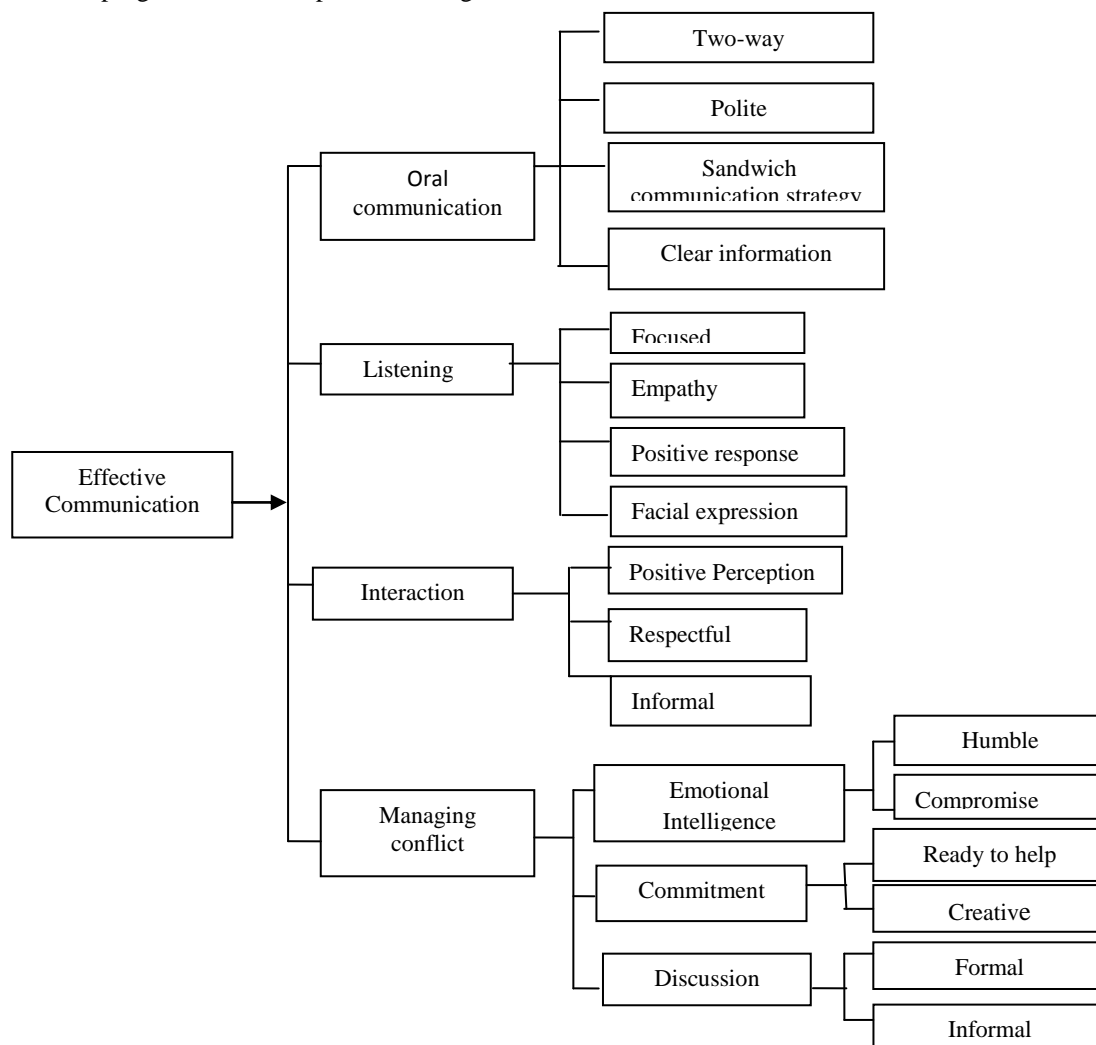


Figure 2: Themes and subthemes on Effective Communication Skills among Teachers

V. DISCUSSION

Research findings revealed that the schools do have the awareness to implement communication practices as a strategy to encourage the involvement of parents and the community at school, and actually obtain a high level for such activities. According to Epstein, the interpretation of high level refers to the school implementing communication activities regularly throughout the year, whereby the activities are carried out by most special education classes, involving mainstream teachers, administrators and special education teachers at

the school. For qualitative findings, it can be summarised that the teachers' communication skills can encourage the participation of parents and the community in assisting the development of students at PPKI schools. Through the research, it was found that to gain the cooperation of parents, interpersonal communication between the parents and the teachers has to be established in a harmonious surrounding which gives comfort to parents and the community. This is in line with Pearson's (2000[17]) view that interpersonal communication is required to solve problems, share information, improve self-perception or fulfill social requirements.

Teachers at S1-S4 are found to possess effective communication skills such as non-verbal behavioural skills like smiling when communicating with parents. Besides that, they equip themselves with oral skills; choosing language that matches the culture and background of the parents and practising effective listening skills. According to Storage (2002), verbal skills is a part of communication process. As such, ideas conveyed are easily understood when the teacher is capable of using effective language. Conversely, failure to use effective language will affect the effectiveness in communication and results in misunderstanding of the message conveyed (Abd Rahim 2003[18]).

Research findings also showed that schools S1-S4 successfully established collaborations due to the teachers possessing listening skills, and this is in line with the research carried out by Brooks (2006([19])). According to Brooks, the capacity to listen well is most important to engage a person in a discussion. A good listener is able to understand one's thoughts and feelings as listening skills can nurture openness between each other. The findings portrayed that the teachers always showed readiness to listen to the problems shared by the parents by being very emphatic. Empathy is a vital aspect in the process of listening, as outlined in the LAFE don't CRY Model by McNoughton et al.(2008[12]). The importance of empathy was also highlighted in a research by Gordon (2003[20]).

In short, the researcher strongly feels that special education teachers require effective communication skills even more compared to their mainstream counterparts as they need to liaise with parents of special needs children who are easily offended, as mentioned by Turnbull et al. (2006 [3]). Therefore it is best to use polite language and non-verbal skills when communicating with them (Friend & Cook 2003 [21]). The practices among teachers at S1-S4 are sensible steps to encourage parents and the community to collaborate with teachers. Abdullah and Ainon (2002[22]) stated that the source of communication conflict is lack of listening skills and empathy towards what is heard. As such, teachers at PPKI schools at S1-S4 strive to become closer to parents by giving full attention to their problems.

In discussing the practices of the teachers, research findings portrayed that the teachers at S1-S4 practise humility in creating interpersonal relationships with parents. They always respect opinions from parents as a step to encourage parents to share ideas and information to boost the development of students at school. If there is information that has to be conveyed to parents regarding the students, the research found that the teachers apply the '*sandwich communication*' strategy. Via this strategy, the teacher will begin the conversation by praising the student, followed by discussing the student's problem and ending the conversation with inspiring words which can motivate the parents. The researcher found that this strategy is highly effective when stressing ideas which parents may find difficult to accept.

Besides that, research findings showed that teachers at S1-S4 possess integrity, based on their readiness to sacrifice their energy and time to assist the parents. They strive to encourage the participation of parents by providing relevant opportunities to facilitate communication with parents. This is due to the fact that time constraint is the main barrier in getting parents to be involved at school (Norshidah et al., 2001[5]). To overcome this problem, the teachers are ready to receive parents according to their free time. Other than that, to encourage parents' involvement, the teachers practise informal communication such as making visits to the students' home or having discussions with parents while they pick up their children from school (during transition period).

VI. CONCLUSION

The researcher is of the opinion that the success of the S1-S4 schools in collaborating with parents and the community is due to the teachers' communication skills, as explained by Lawson (2003 [0]). Two-way communication practised by the teachers at S1-S4 is the most effective communication method to attract parents, as stated by Joshi et al. (2005[23]). When the teacher acts as listener and information conveyor to parents, it will influence the parents to become involved with their children's learning at school. They may feel more appreciated and are more confident to discuss issues with the teachers as they have obtained clear information regarding their children's education. As such, it can be concluded that teachers who practise effective communication have the significance on the success of collaboration between the school and parents.

Teachers are provided with more opportunities to interact with parents compared to school administrators. As such, teachers can assist administrators in realising effective collaborations through skills that they possess.

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