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**STRATEGIES OF ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE
TEACHING PROFESSION**

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to collect and interpret empirical data to outline the perception of students about the role of assertive communication in inter-human communication and into the teacher-student communication. In pursuit of this intention, we organized and conducted three exploratory workshop activities based on the focus group. The concepts of didactic profession and assertive communication are delimited from the perspective of the latest theories. There are presented arguments concerning the importance of integrated development of some teaching competence to the students who are trained for teacher profession such as: communication skills, self-assertion and self-management. The research focuses on several essential dimensions of assertive communication, namely, initiating communication, self-esteem, defending one's own rights, expressing positive and negative emotions. Its results give us insights into the students' personal perspectives on building the teacher-student relationship, on the concrete self-assertion strategies they use consciously, on handling conflicts and injustice situations, and on the techniques used to manage emotions in the context of didactic relations. Starting from the types of assertive behaviours manifested by students in communication a structure of training and personal development needs of students is being developed, as well as a series of educational strategies that can meet the expectations of future teachers.

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1. Introduction

Wagner (2014) describes new abilities that pupils and students need for their career in the present days, sustained education and citizenship in an increasingly challenging world. He calls them the Seven Core Survival Skills: Critical thinking and problem solving; Collaboration and leadership; Agility and adaptability; Initiative and entrepreneurialism; Effective oral and written communication; Accessing and analysing information; Curiosity and imagination.

Friedman, in an interview with Tony Wagner (Wagner, 2014), states that more important than the intellectual quotient are the curiosity quotient (CQ) and the passion quotient (PQ) that must be developed and cultivated, thus giving the student the chance to explore his own areas of interest and expression. We consider that in order to create a favourable frame to stimulate intelligence, emotion, curiosity, passion, the student must first build a positive self-image, high self-esteem and assertive communication abilities in order to assert himself/herself both empathically and firm, unique, independent and innovative. Therefore, the teacher can successfully exercise his/her power of influence, based on the authority derived from expertise and reference (Johns, 1998), namely, the one derived from the meticulous preparation and the one derived from the capacity to efficiently manage interpersonal relationships. Using these sources of social influence, the teacher displays the ability to listen carefully and empathically, encourage and set limits, help the student discover his/her own talents, support teams to find solutions and identify new problems and strategies of intervention. It is highly important that the teacher guide pupils/students as an activating authority that generates responsibility, independence, assertiveness and applied projective thinking.

Nowadays, social competences have become so important because of the influence they have on the personal and professional lives of individuals. For example, the social skills and competences of children and adolescents strongly affect their success of school adaptation and popularity. Thus, popular children and adolescents tend to be calm, outgoing, and friendly. They act pro-socially and are rarely disruptive or aggressive in the interpersonal relationships they have. In addition, they tend to have better perspective-taking skills than their peers who are less socially competent (Tufeanu, 2014).

Lazarus (1973) analyses assertiveness and defines it as being the ability to influence the others, and Cornelius and Faire (1996) consider assertiveness as the choice of the individual in communication that helps him/her sustain his/her position without blaming or treating the other person as an enemy. Assertive behaviour promotes positive, direct, politely and goal-oriented behaviours, while maximizing the power and efficiency of social interactions. The essential skills and attitudes that form this sphere and are part of assertiveness are: to say “no” when the situation asks for it; advancing the request as a favour; expressing positive and negative feelings; initiating and sustaining a conversation; manifestation of the power of persuasion; the attitude of defending his/her own rights without breaking the rights of the others; self-esteem and desire to affirm. It is highlighted through these attitudes the individual has to display that assertiveness is about expressing and clarifying your own points of view, self-respect and it means to make yourself heard. Between being passive and aggressive, assertiveness involves negotiating with others and implies maintaining verticality, balance and in the same time respecting the wishes and rights of the others.

As Fontana (1988) argues, communication facilitates interpersonal interaction and expression of one’s own feelings and recognition of others’ feelings. Both at children and adolescents, both at students and teachers it is necessary to stimulate the release of feelings, whether positive or negative. Difficulties

that occur in this direction are related to both negative and positive feelings. Communicating to others the negative feelings they cause can spark a conflict, so many people, avoiding contradictory discussions, repress their feelings. Bringing to the attention of the others the negative feelings they incite can spark a conflict, so that many people, while avoiding contradictory discussions, repress their feelings. In this case, the middle solution, that also removes uncertainty and passivity, but also arrogance and aggressiveness, is the open recognition of behaviour that causes dissatisfaction and the attempts to find ways to solve the situation.

To counteract the negative effects that derive from these deficiencies in the abilities involved in assertiveness, teachers should get involved by giving students support in recognizing their own feelings and the feelings of the others. In this way, students can be determined to look more closely at their own behaviour, choose the right words and actions to convey their emotions and decide on how to respond to the feelings of the others. Assuming and sustaining the rights to act according to one's own will, without harming others and being more open and honest to others offer self-confidence, which gives a greater freedom and satisfaction in relation to one's own person and the others. The defending, recognizing and claiming of one's own rights, accepting responsibilities and respecting the needs of others together with the wish to affirm and prepare for social success are very important components of the sphere of assertiveness.

2. Problem Statement

The competences necessary for survival define a set of competences that a graduate should accumulate during his/her studies so that he/she can maximize his/her potential and achieve economic, social and familial progress. In this set of competences, must be found *creative abilities* to develop flexibility, originality, sensitivity towards problems; *social abilities* that stimulate communication, co-operation, empathy, assertiveness, self-expression, self-esteem, a set of abilities that give people the belief that they can take their lives in their own hands, that they can produce results that will have an impact; abilities to exploit interdisciplinarity, to innovate in different fields of interest - exact sciences, art, literature, etc. An important condition for acquiring these competences is providing the context in which the students demonstrate that they master these skills.

Some of the already mentioned abilities can be evaluated for the teaching profession in formal and non-formal contexts, others in pedagogical practice, others will be assured by their transfer to certain social contexts of the student and will be highlighted in the self-assertion strategies and the professional and social innovation projects that they will implement. In the teacher-student relationship there are deadlocks and difficulties due to the deficiencies existing in the assertive communication.

The teacher who assumes responsibility as a trainer and aims to maximize the potential of the student must develop the skills to communicate firmly and openly, to ask with conviction and persuasion, to refuse and to set democratic limits and rules express constructive emotions and express a high self-esteem that generates perseverance and progress. Students preparing for the teaching career should be integrated into structured programs for the development of assertive communication skills.

3. Research Questions

A series of questions guide our analytical approach: What is the extent to which students know and understand the concept of assertive communication? What are, according to the student's future teachers opinions, the implications of the presence, respectively the absence of assertive communication in the exercise of the teaching profession? To what extent the student's future teachers believe that they have specific competences for assertive behaviour? Are there assertive communication techniques in the repertoire of behaviour of the students future teachers? And if the answer is positive, what would that be?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to collect and interpret empirical data in order to outline the perception of young people about the role of assertive communication in inter-human communication in general, in teacher-student communication in particular.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the proposed aim, we organized and conducted three exploratory workshop activities based on focus-groups (Evangelidis, 2005; Zappas, 2008; Whittake, Pegorie, Read, Birt, & Foldspan, 2010), a set of 11 semi-structured questions being the framework on which the debate was built for each of them (Krueger & Casey, 2005; Agrabian, 2004; Bulai, 2000; Chelcea, 2004; Iluț., 1997; Morgan, 1998; Vaughn & all, 1996). Previously, starting from a suggestive didactical movie (Reputeagency, 2005), there has been a briefly update of the theoretical information on assertive communication and assertive behaviour. Students of the 3rd year of the National University of Arts "George Enescu" Issy who attended the pedagogical module for the teaching career within the Department for Teacher Training were invited to participate in the workshop on the topic "Assertive Communication - an Effective Teacher Tool". To our invitation 28 persons responded: 11 students from the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, 8 students from the Faculty of Music, Instrumental Interpretation specialization and 9 students from the Faculty of Music, Music Pedagogy specialization. All participants agreed to participate and disseminate the data of the workshop. The workshop 1, the one with the students of the Faculty of Visual Arts, was carried out 120 minutes, the Workshop 2, the one with the students from the Faculty of Music, Instrumental Interpretation specialization was carried out 45 minutes, the Workshop 3, the one with the students at the Faculty of Music, Music Pedagogy specialization lasted 50 minutes.

6. Findings

6.1. Data analyses

The data were recorded on audio support, transcribed and then processed according to the *thematic clipping technique* (Bulai, 2000, Krueger & Casey, 2005). In each of the three workshops a series of themes and subtopics were sketched:

6.1.1. What assertive communication is:

This theme is defined by the ideas put forward by the participants in the three workshops: The formulation of an open request, the courage to express his/her own opinion without unfairness, the use of

appropriate non-verbal language is the most usually met components in the opinion of the participant students with regard to assertiveness. Although with a reduced frequency, are also mentioned the emotional management abilities in difficult situations and the confidence in the possibility to persuade others. In all three workshops the predominant idea is that of open communication expressed through verbal and non-verbal language and through the transparency of request. In the third workshop, the importance of a firm, calm and confident attitude is imperative.

- The teacher, as an adult and professional, is responsible for building a securing emotional environment in the classroom, he is a facilitator of positive emotions and of learning: “From the teacher more dedication to facilitate communication needs to exist. If the dam is on the part of the student, for example, it is not a fluency of communication, then the teacher is the one who has to remedy the situation ... he is a facilitator.” (Workshop 1)
- Awareness of the relationship between learning, empathy and assertiveness: “In the case of passivity, children will no longer be interested in the teaching matter, in the case of aggressiveness ... the students will learn with fear and will look in void” (Workshop 1); In the absence of empathy and assertiveness, there can be no constructive relationship between teacher-student and learning deadlocks appear”. “It can be a trampoline for the student if the teacher is willing to listen and understand when something bothers you. And thus you become more ambitious, you evolve”. A barrier is created, and it accumulates and accumulates together as a ball, and you cannot progress” (Workshop 2); “The teacher is responsible for the quality and efficiency of communication. For this it is important that he also listens to the students’ opinion, to be empathic” (Workshop 3).
- The identification of the blockages that occur in the assertive communication expressed in teachers’ behaviour that stir students’ frustrations (carried to revolt) (Workshop 3): the indifference to listen to the students – “To accept our opinion as well. Not only what they claim is right.”; the attitude of superiority “(...) not to make you feel like you are the stupidest man on earth and he is the smartest because he is the teacher.”; anchoring into traditional methods while working with students – “it should be understood that some methods no longer work with us (...); forgiving too easily those colleagues who attend lessons rarely;

6.1.2. How assertive competence is expressed in behaviours

a) Expressing positive and negative emotions

- Differentiated, depending on how intimate the relationship is: “It matters how close a person is when expressing your emotions. Even if you are a direct person, you say these things to strangers in a nicely packed manner. To the close ones, you can tell them what you think.” (Workshop 1); “If you express your feelings (the positive ones) in your circle of friends, they will be glad for you and you will get a wave of more and more positive emotions (...). But with the negative I try to fight alone, without expressing it.” (Workshop 2).
- Self-control is important in expressing emotions, it occurs after the awareness of negative emotions and its consequences (both on the status with the one you communicate with and on the own status) and then self-education to a positive lifestyle. (Workshop 1).

- Techniques to express negative feelings: "... with negative feelings, because I read, I try to be careful and not to be in a nervous tension very quickly. I started to change this at myself. There are situations, but I can solve them calmly because I know that ... these situations of conflict degenerated. When I began to consider the profession of teacher ... it is a position where you really can't react aggressively." (Workshop 2); "To express negative feelings I use the sandwich method: first I offer something +, then I see what the problem is and end up with something +, in the sense that I can say: I see you are an involved person, only that here it's the problem, I know that you can be more careful in the future." (Workshop 2).
- Repressing feelings: "if you express your feelings, the other will see that you are vulnerable." (Workshop 2); (Workshop 3): apathy, hostility expressed indirectly

b) Support/assertion of rights - Students describe a wide range of reactions, both from the sphere of passive, aggressive and assertive reactions:

- Aggressive: "when you are frustrated you explode" or "with strangers... I kind of destroy them so to be sure they will not touch me next time" (Workshop 1)
- Passive (passive- aggressive): "If we find a colleague who understands and empathizes with us and we are on and comment on the situation, then we resign" (Workshop 3). "... from sadness, to anger, then accept the situation, resignation, after that we still become angry again..." (Workshop 3); "It could be a misunderstanding, maybe there is really a problem (tolerance for those who violate rights)" (Workshop 2).
- Assertive: "I wouldn't give him/her satisfaction. And I'd like to be calm to explain to him/her what he/she has done. When you revolt out loud and speak in a high tone, you give satisfaction to the one who has violated your rights. If you maintain your firm position and dignity, that person will begin to step back." ; "But if you treat things gently, the other may understand that you are too good and you are seen as a fool, thus you rather show the other that you have certain principles and demand to be respected" (Workshop 1); "It may be aggressive in the first stage, then negotiate until an agreement is reached" (Workshop 3).
- Face to face with an authority, it is preferable not to claim your rights in any way, but to preserve the appearance of obedience "if we have a conflict with a person with authority in university or ... as a student you shut up and do what you are told, you say what he/she want to hear and you do as you think. There are situations in which we can't manifest after the first impulse, we have to behave one way or the other" (Workshop 1).

c) Manifestation of independence

- Involves moral attitude and principles that guide you to be authentic without being influenced by tendencies. "You are sure of yourself and of what you do and it doesn't affect others' opinion, and not with wickedness, you just do not feel the need and even if the others have a negative opinion it does not affect you because you still believe in what you do and you see of your business." , "Have the courage to be yourself in your art" (Workshop 1); "Act according to your own reasoning without allowing yourself to be led by the flock spirit" (Workshop 3).

- Involves self-assurance, “be sure of yourself, have a knowledge base that makes you feel safe with yourself.” (Workshop 1).
- The manifestation of independence is associated with assuming responsibilities: “Assuming your responsibility and demonstrating to those closest to you that you have achieved your goals” (Workshop 1); “I take full responsibility of the decisions I take” (Workshop 2) “I act in a personal way even if an older adult tries to offer me his/her solution” (Workshop 3).
- It is associated with the power of expression and maintaining a personal perspective: “You have the power to express yourself, to do something, and then stay firm, bring arguments and keep them, don’t give up”. (Workshop 2).

6.2. Data interpretation

The first topic, that of the meaning of assertive communication, reveals that in all of the three situations the participants prove that they understand an important sequence of the concept. Assertive communication is especially associated with the open attitude in formulating a request, in a manner in which the message is transmitted clearly, concisely, directly, both through verbal, non-verbal or paraverbal language. Nevertheless, the idea of “the other”, of “partner in communication”, of the “rights of the other” is not taken into account even if it’s invoked the “calm approach of a situation”, which implies more human presence. It is possible that the specifics of the movie they’ve watched at the beginning of the debates to have emphasized this side of assertive communication, and then it has also been highlighted in the reactions of the participants.

In close connection with this first topic is also the second - the role of assertive communication in the teacher-student relationship that all participants appreciate and look for in their teachers. It is a strong and natural tendency for all those involved in workshops to question situations in which teachers have not reacted assertively and to present the risks of passivity and aggression in the teacher’s conduct: first of all, the deadlocks in communication are highlighted and these will be the consequence of superficial learning up to the full loss of interest in the study.

On the other hand, an empathic and assertive conduct from the teacher, a conduct that he has to be conscious and responsible, may be “a trampoline for the student”, helping to increase motivation for study and long-lasting learning. A third theme is represented by the ways in which assertive competence is expressed in their own behaviours, with three subtopics: the expression of positive and negative emotions, affirmation of rights and the manifestation of independence. Regarding the manifestation of emotions, we notice major differences in the reactions between the three groups of participants. The participants in the first workshop, students at the Faculty of Visual Arts, advocate for the expression of emotions, whether positive or negative, and some of them question the expression of negative emotions in an assertive manner and even offering techniques that they use to keep distance from aggression (awareness and self-control, sandwich technique).

Students from the Faculty of Musical Interpretation consider that expressing emotions, other than through music, can make you vulnerable in front of others, and therefore they tend to internalize them or to express them with prudence. Moreover, they see this behaviour as a virtue, considering that the internalization of negative feelings makes you stronger. Supporting rights seems to be a great challenge.

When their rights are violated, the participants of the first and third workshop describe a wide range of reactions - passive, aggressive, assertive – even though the discussion leads in a first stage to an aggressive response, secondly, they accept that assertive reaction is more productive, even if it is more difficult to put into action. The participants in the second workshop also recognize that they rarely respond assertively, and the difficulties have different causes: self-protection, low self-esteem, passive or aggressive behavioural automatisms, or in other words a lack of assertive conduct education. The manifestation of independence is a behaviour that can be expressed more easily in assertive manner in the view of the art students. It is associated with the responsibility of their own decisions and the power of expressing their own perspective.

7. Conclusion

This paper aims to support the development of assertiveness as a solution to the contemporary educational challenges and presents the results of a qualitative scientific research based on the focus group method. These results provide insights into the students' personal perspectives on the understanding of assertive communication, on the conditions of building the efficient teacher-student relationships, on the existing self-assertion strategies they use consciously – the expression of feelings, the defending of rights, or the manifestation of independence. As for the definition of assertive communication, it can be seen that students understand assertiveness in terms of clear and courageous communication of the verbal message as well as the formulation of a request. There is no mention of the ability to refuse and to set limits, the constructive expression of negative emotions, or the affirmation and defence of one's own rights. In the teacher-student communication, students identify as imperative those assertive behaviours that facilitate learning and active involvement: creating positive emotions in the classroom, supportive attitudes, recognizing students' needs, behaviour between aggressive and passive and non-discriminating. However, it is not specified how the teacher can manifest himself as an authority that exercises influence with assertive behaviours of self-assertion. Regarding the assertive strategies used by students in relation to teachers, three types of behaviours are identified

- The expression of positive and negative feelings is difficult, most of them being accustomed to not express them, to internalize negative emotions in particular and to express them only in a relational intimate context. We also encounter methods of expressing negative emotions, such as the “sandwich method” or “self-control that reduces aggressiveness”.
- Protection of own rights in the teacher-student relationship is not manifested, the attitude is one of acceptance and there is no challenge. Negotiating or empathic self-asserting strategies are used in non-formal relationships, predominantly being the aggressive reactions or those of abandonment, resignation.
- Independence is correlated to self-confidence and personal projects, responsibility and personal decision.

We take notice that students express independently, are capable of taking responsibilities and decisions, but the step towards assertiveness requires action not only for their own benefit but to bring a change for the group, community, society at the same time. In conclusion, the courses comprised in the psycho-pedagogical training module familiarize students with the notion of assertiveness, help them

understand new behavioural patterns, but it is necessary to implement personal development modules that generate the transition from awareness to practice and transfer into the everyday life of the assertive communication strategies. In this way, in the role of teachers, they will be able to act as authorities exercising the power to motivate, arouse interest, stimulate learning and shape autonomous, creative, and capable children at community level.

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