

INVESTIGATING TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THEIR COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' views on their communication with students have always been an important issue. Communication with students with deviant behaviour is a special case. Nowadays the number of such students is still rising. Therefore, teachers have to adapt to the situation and look for the ways how to work with such students. This research involved the schools where the number of students with deviant behaviour is high, and was the part of the project "The Hard Nut of Communication" to stress that the communication with such students is difficult and needs much efforts. The project was carried out at Riga Educational and Informational Methodological Centre (RIIMC) and involved three schools – Riga Reinholds Shmelings Secondary School, Riga Secondary School No 15, and Riga Austrumu Primary School. The project tried to explore how improving teacher–student–teacher relationships affects their academic performance, social relationships, and future development. The project was implemented from October 2023 until April 2024. Fifteen teachers were part of the project. The present paper presents the data collected during the project. The research results show that teachers' communication and cooperation with their students is of paramount importance in the teaching–learning process and can have a positive impact on students' learning outcomes, behaviour, inclusion, and school belonging, as well as lead to a healthier lifestyle and improve students' quality of life. Although the number of teachers participating in the project is small (15), the general trends show similar results. However, further studies will provide more reliable results.

Keywords: *behaviour, belonging to school, communication (teachers–students–students), inclusion, quality of life, teaching–learning process*

Introduction

Communication between teachers and students has always been an issue to be investigated. The present paper reflects the results of the project "The Hard Nut of Communication" focusing on the communication between teachers and students with deviant social behaviour. Riga Reinholds Shmelings Secondary School, Riga Secondary School No 15, and Riga Austrumu Primary School that participated in the project had rather

many students whose social behaviour could be characterised as negative, whose learning results were low, who were not included in the class, and who did not belong to their school. The project included several activities with the aim to improve teachers' communication competence with their students. Out of school lecturers were invited to share their knowledge and experience with teachers. The first lecturer was Mg. theol. Rudīte Losāne. She has been working as a chaplain at Iļģuciems women prison. There were three activities guided by Rudīte Losāne. At her first lecture she introduced with the specifics of prison environment and subculture. Then she spoke about the resocialization programme "Mirjama" founded and led by her. The last activity guided by Rudīte Losāne was watching the film "Iļģuciems sisters" ("Iļģuciema māšas"). The director of the film is Elita Kļaviņa. Teachers watched the film and participated in the discussion. Apart from that the project also introduced with the lecture given by Dr. psych. Airisa Šteinberga who shared her knowledge and experience in work with students focusing on the ones with deviant behaviour. Moreover, the project also included two lectures given by the teachers who participated in the project. At the beginning of the project the teachers introduced with their view on communication problems with students and shared expectations from the project, but at the end they discussed gained lessons and future prospects. The author of the research Antra Roskoša was the coordinator of the project.

The main aim of this particular research was to identify the most effective ways for teachers to communicate. This can positively impact students' learning outcomes, inclusion, sense of belonging, and a positive school climate as well as an overall better quality of life.

The main research questions were the following: 1. Can teachers help students improve their learning, inclusion, and school belonging? 2. What are the most important ways of communicating that can positively impact students and be crucial for their well-being at school and a healthier lifestyle?

The research presents notable scientific value by addressing an emerging educational challenge to effective teacher–student communication. Nowadays, the number of students having deviant social behaviour is still rising, and teachers have to improve their competence to work with such students productively.

Given the ongoing rise in such behavioural issues, the research contributes to the broader academic discourse by examining the factors favouring productive teachers' communication with students, thus fostering effective, inclusive, and respectful learning environments.

Enhancing Productive Teacher–Student Communication

Communication and collaboration are the two pillars of pedagogy that make a difference in the process of teaching as well as the climate of the classroom. Experts of Oxford University (2024, p. 39) emphasise that communication, collaboration, and mediation are key transition skills, identifying communication as the top priority: "Being able to

communicate in different social situations is, of course, one of the main goals of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) at all levels of proficiency.” As Nielsen and Shunk maintain in their publication (2002, p. 42): “One of the most important elements of the learning process is the communication between the teacher and the students. It is through communication that teachers convey their knowledge to students, facilitating its retention in memory. Learning is more effective when there is two-way communication” (translated from Latvian by I. Kočote).

An important aspect is the students’ skill to cooperate and work in a team that includes students’ ability to form and develop their own opinions, respect and tolerate each other. A teacher is the one who can foster trust in students and create a positive pedagogical environment, which serves as a foundation for increasing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The former relies on the person’s inner ability to improve the situation because of the pleasure of doing something or knowing how important it is to mitigate the drawbacks. Extrinsic motivation refers to performing something as a mandatory assignment (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 445). Both types of motivation work better with positive feedback and a favourable classroom environment and should be supported by the teacher.

Motivation is also based on a sense of belonging, the need to be accepted by the family, school, and community, as stated by Špona (2018, pp. 16–17), the successful outcome of which depends on the collaboration of all parties. Not only communication between a teacher and students but also communication among students themselves should be encouraged, as the nature of helping behaviour within peer-directed small groups may be most effective for learning, especially for students who have difficulty with the material (Webba & Mastergeorgeb, 2003, p. 73). This approach stimulates students’ interest in the subject and is helpful when a timid student is embarrassed to ask a question to the teacher. Moreover, a peer student may explain the complicated matter in layman’s language. This, in turn, improves the student’s confidence and boosts the learning morale.

Research conducted in Mexican (Sylvia Rojas-Drummond) and British (Neil Mercer) schools supports the view that children will especially benefit from a classroom experience in which there is a careful integration of teacher-led discourse and peer-group interaction (Rojas-Drummond & Mercer, 2003, p. 110). This research, funded by the British Council, involved primary classrooms, however, the outcomes might be applied to later stages of student development. The authors state: “Education is seen as taking place through dialogue, with the interactions between students and teachers reflecting the historical development, cultural values and social practices of the societies and communities in which educational institutions exist” (*ibid.*, p. 100).

Amadi and Kufre Paul (2017, p. 1102) at the beginning of their research pose a question, why some teachers, despite their perceived knowledge of the subject matter and probably the methods of instruction, fail to achieve their set objectives. The paper emphasises that communication is “not the mere talking and hearing that happens in every normal classroom” (*ibid.*). The authors consider the psychological and emotional communication that predisposes the learners to effectual learning and provide

ten ways a teacher ensures effective communication in the classroom: showing sincere enthusiasm or humour, building a friendship, making learners focus, ensuring trust, creating an atmosphere of interdependence, probe into intellectual aptitude at the onset of a class, make learners feel challenged, be a master of a subject matter, understand different learning styles and be generic, be accommodating and tolerate students' mistakes. The research reveals that students have a strong positive relationship between their level of communication and their academic achievement (ibid., p. 1107).

Group work is the basis for Communicative Language Teaching as Blatchford et al. (2003) researched various aspects of it, especially the social pedagogy of group work. The scholars believe that the distinction between a teacher and students may blur in the future as information becomes increasingly accessible and instantly available. However, learning extends beyond acquiring information. The classroom of the future, along with its evolving and relevant pedagogy, may focus on co-learners, that is, students learning from and with each other, collaboratively making sense of the information available to everyone (ibid., p. 169).

This notion that students may contribute to the learning process is ubiquitous, as Gillies (2019) in her research highlights the key role talk plays in the construction of knowledge, understanding, and learning. She signifies the role of teachers in fostering student interaction, which is also supported by the current research. Špona and Čamane (2009, p. 17) also emphasise the importance of collaboration and sharing, stating that: "in the mental process of the mind and the emotional expression of attitudes, there is a shift from the internal to the external activity of mind, manifesting through practical means such as speech, action, and behaviour. Students of different ages have different interests and learning intensities, but the most important thing for them is to understand and practice the need to share what they have learned with their peers. This process, known as exteriorisation, involves explaining, understanding, demonstrating, and collaboratively modelling their learning. Simultaneously, in the process of interiorisation, they reinforce what has been learnt" (translated by I. Kočote).

Nowadays, with the development of information and communication technology tools mutual communication often takes place in the virtual world through texting and messaging, which is another way of communicating, especially for those students who have difficulty with face-to-face communication, it provides an opportunity to express themselves. On the other hand, the lack of experience in public speaking narrows their options in the labour market. The COVID pandemic restricted students to their rooms, as distance education was in place; therefore, live, face-to-face communication posed some difficulty. Being lecturers at Riga Technical University, the authors of the research can share some experience concerning communication; namely, students give preference to written communication with tutors. Therefore face-to-face communication is not a priority anymore.

It is also important to stress that a transition skill at a basic level can be understood as a skill that allows students to effectively manage any period of change, which could also apply to a change from adolescence to adulthood, a period that is never easy for a teenager. Teachers who manage the process of communication in the classroom can help

their students succeed in this process. Teachers share their knowledge and experience to enrich their students' knowledge and experience. Teachers can also introduce the trends of a healthy lifestyle and a better life quality.

A healthy lifestyle may improve the life quality of students who have low learning results, deviant behaviour, and problems of inclusion and belonging to school. Therefore, the popularization of a healthy lifestyle among students was also researched (see question 11). Concerning the factor of contact with others, qualitative research interviews conducted by a team of German scientists from Heidelberg University in Mannheim (Diehl, et al., 2018, p. 6) revealed that playing sports involved a group experience and a shared sense of achievement. Further, students indicated that sports were a source of fun and pleasure and could provide a feeling of self-affirmation. This could be significant for students' inclusion at school.

Thus, the research aimed to identify the most effective communication methods for teachers that could positively impact students' learning outcomes, behaviour, sense of inclusion, belonging, and a positive school climate. A healthy lifestyle and a better quality of life are also of high importance. The research methodology and results are analysed in more detail in the following sections.

Methodology

There were several steps to conduct the research. The research started with the development of the questionnaire. Based on the theoretical literature (Engere et al., 2014, p. 46–61; 2003, p. 34–38, 38–44); Ľlena (2019, p. 42–43); Plaude (2001, p. 161–167); Cepelis et al., (2001, p. 23–31); Brahuna, Gorkija (2016, p. 31–35) original questionnaire was developed by the author of the research Antra Roskoša. Fifteen teachers participated in the research. They were the teachers whose everyday work involves communication with students with deviant behaviour and who have the necessary experience to comment this topic. They were surveyed at the beginning and end of the project. The teachers were asked to evaluate the way they communicate with their students. The data were then compared to determine if the project had an impact on teachers' communication with their students. There were 12 statements included in the questionnaire. They can be divided into three groups: 1) communication that can solve conflicts, 2) communication that can help students include into the school and promote their sense of belonging, and 3) communication that can help students lead a healthy lifestyle to improve the quality of life. Teachers were asked to rate the items on a three-point scale, 1 – agree, 2 – neither agree nor disagree, 3 – disagree. The data obtained were processed using MS Excel.

As mentioned before the project more focused on teachers' communication with students with deviant behaviour. Therefore, the research was also specific and concentrated on the same problem – communication difficulties between teachers and their students. Therefore, the base of the research was the schools and teachers who work with students with such communication hardship.

The results of the research follow in the next paragraph.

Research Results

Different aspects can define communication. This research analysed teachers' communication and intended to find out clues to help students succeed and show higher learning and behaviour results both in school and in life.

The first criterion to test how teachers communicate with their students deals with the solution of conflicts and is addressed by Questions 1–4. At first, the teachers had to assess if they helped their students trust and communicate with each other (see Figure 1). The data prove that there is no change in teachers' way of communication when we compare their performance at the beginning of the project (in October 2023) and at the end of it (in April 2024). It means the teachers were already aware of the need to help their students improve communication in the group and promote their trust in each other.

When analysing the teachers' attitude to the statement "I help my students resolve conflicts – control emotions, be objective", there is a slight difference in their answers comparing the data in October 2023 and April 2024 (see Figure 2). Fourteen teachers agreed with this statement in October and slightly fewer (12 teachers) in April. Apart from that, there was only one teacher at the beginning of the project but three – at the end of it, who neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. This means that the teachers may have become more critical when evaluating their way of communicating. It is a positive tendency because critical thinking and self-evaluation can be the key factors to improve the competence of teachers' communication.

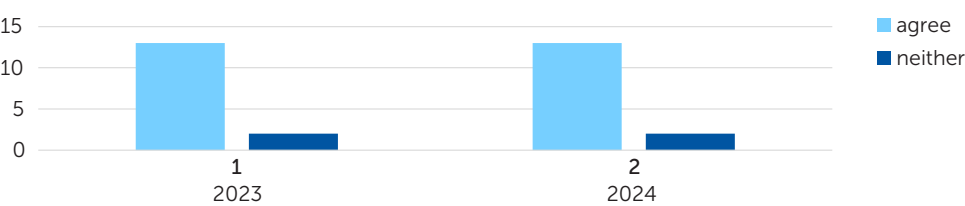


Figure 1 Responses to Question 1 "I help my students to trust and communicate with each other (2023–2024)"

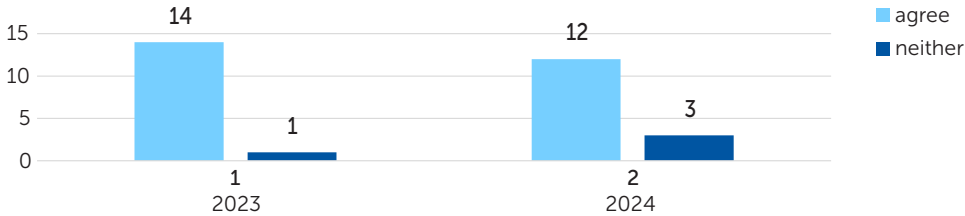


Figure 2 Responses to Question 2 "I help my students to solve conflicts - control emotions, be objective (2023–2024)"

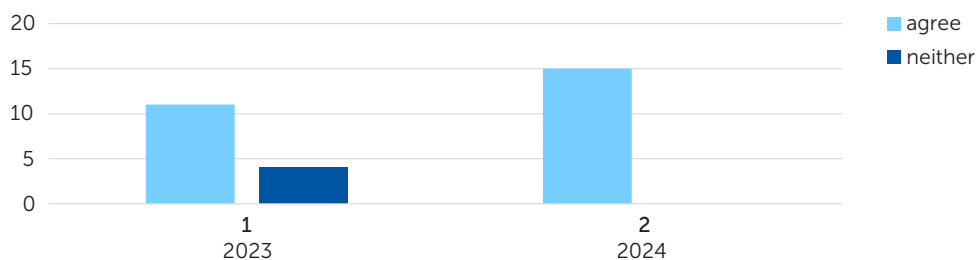


Figure 3 Responses to Question 3 "I help my students to assess their own and other students' behaviour (2023–2024)"

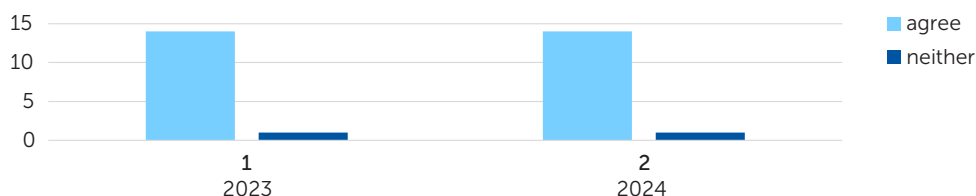


Figure 4 Responses to Question 4 "I help my students to get positive emotions and get rid of negative ones – fear from a teacher, classmates, marks (2023–2024)"

Another aspect, which dealt with the competence of teachers' communication to resolve conflicts, characterised the ability of teachers to help students evaluate their own and other students' behaviour. The data show progress in teachers' attitudes. If, in October 2023, 11 teachers agreed with this statement, then in April 2024 there were already 15 teachers who agreed with the statement (see Figure 3). Furthermore, at the beginning of the project, there were four teachers who neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, but at the end of the project, there were no teachers with this attitude. This proves the importance of the project in promoting possible change in teachers' attitudes. Teachers are more aware of the need to evaluate and analyse the behaviour – both their own and that of their students.

One more statement that examined teachers' communication competence revealed that teachers helped their students obtain positive emotions and get rid of negative emotions – fear of a teacher, classmates, and grades. According to the data, the project did not lead to any progress in teachers' attitudes toward this competence. Before the project and upon its completion, teachers' responses remained the same – 14 teachers agreed with the statement, and only one teacher neither agreed nor disagreed with it (see Figure 4). Thus, almost all teachers (14) already help their students manage and control their emotions. This means that the teachers' competence to perform such communication, which can reduce conflicts in the group, can be characterised as high.

The second criterion (examined through Questions 5–9), which identified the teachers' communication process with their students, characterised such communication that could help students be included in the school and promote their sense of belonging there.

Since students' sense of belonging to their school and group is closely related to respecting and tolerating each other, teachers needed to assess whether they were helping their students respect and tolerate each other. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the project, all teachers (15) agreed with this statement, but at the end of the project 13 teachers gave a positive answer, and two teachers neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (see Figure 5). This proves that teachers critically evaluate their communication competence, likely encouraged by the project.

Another statement that characterises teachers' communicative competence is assessed when teachers help their students develop their skills to cooperate and work in a team. It is important to emphasise that this skill is crucial to promote students' inclusion in school and their belonging there. The data show the importance of this particular communication competence of teachers. There are significant changes that can be brought about by the project. If at the beginning of the project, there were only six teachers who agreed with the statement, then at the end of the project, there were already 10 teachers who gave a positive answer. There were also more teachers (7) who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement in October 2023, but there were fewer teachers (4) whose opinion was not so strong in April 2024. Few teachers (2) disagreed with the statement in October 2023 and only one in April 2024 (see Figure 6). The data demonstrate that after the project, the teachers consider the possibility of collaboration and teamwork more seriously. This can lead their students to a more successful inclusion into school and promote their sense of belonging there.

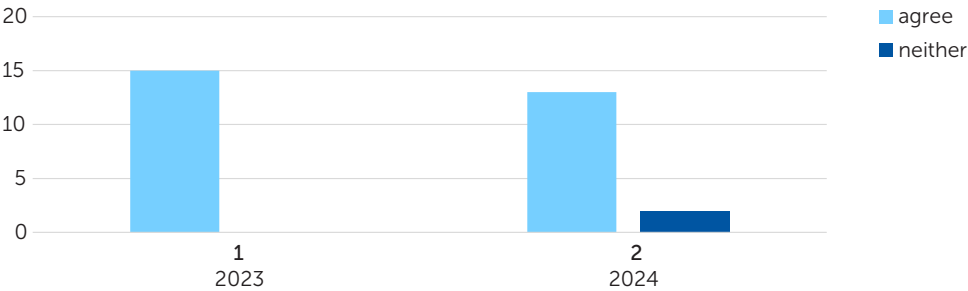


Figure 5 Responses to Question 5 "I help my students to respect and tolerate each other (2023–2024)"

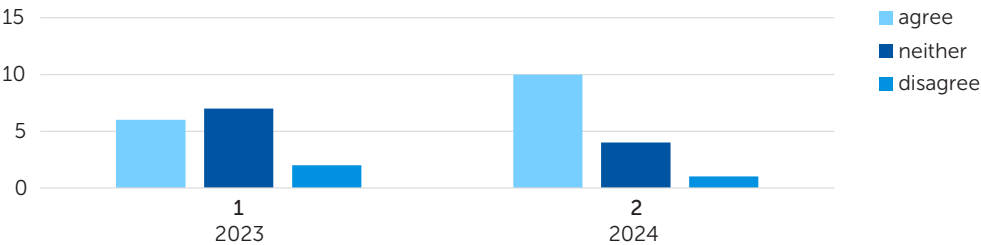


Figure 6 Responses to Question 6 "I help my students to develop their skill to cooperate and work in a team (2023–2024)"

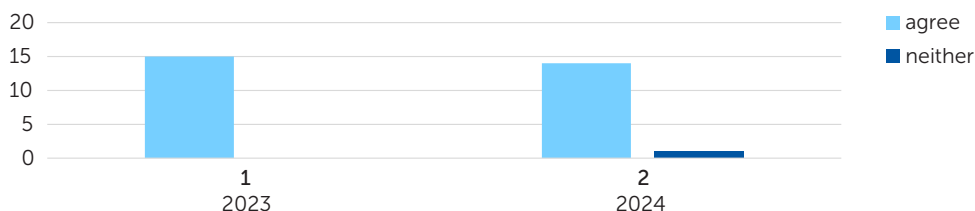


Figure 7 Responses to Question 7 "I help my students to develop their skill to form their own opinion and respect other ones"

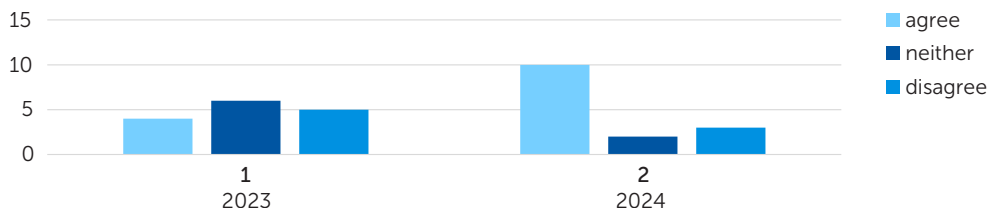


Figure 8 Responses to Question 8 "I try to diminish students' tendency to avoid communication and inclusion in the class (2023–2024)"

In addition, another aspect that can promote students' inclusion and school belonging is the competence of their teachers to develop students' ability to form their own opinions and respect others. The data show that there are no significant changes in the responses of the teachers influenced by the project. Fifteen teachers agreed with the statement in October 2023, and 14 teachers agreed in April 2024. The number of teachers who did not have a strong opinion is almost none; only one teacher neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement in April 2024 (see Figure 7). Thus, the data demonstrate that almost all the teachers involved in the project consider the importance of students' forming opinions and respecting each other's opinions to be very high. Therefore, the environment of the schools participating in the project could be characterised as democratic and inclusive. Students' opinions are very important.

Another aspect confirmed that the schools participating in the project had a democratic and inclusive environment. The teachers had to assess whether they had tried to reduce the tendency of students to avoid communication and inclusion in class. It is necessary to emphasise that the teachers' evaluation of this particular aspect showed that most of the progress was probably made due to the project. There were only four teachers who agreed with this statement in October 2023. However, by April 2024, there were already ten teachers who gave a positive response. It should also be noted that there were more teachers (6), who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement in October 2023. However, only two teachers did the same in April 2024. The number of teachers who disagreed with the statement was rather high compared to other statements. Five teachers disagreed at the beginning of the project, and three teachers at the end of it (see Figure 8). It could be concluded that after the project, teachers were possibly more concerned about the necessity to diminish students' tendency to avoid communication and separation. Therefore, the project may also have an impact on students' attitudes.

The last aspect revealing teachers' communication to promote students' inclusion and belonging to school dealt with the development of students' personality and talents. It is important to emphasise that the talents of students and the positive development of their personalities can be crucial to increase their self-esteem and value, thus helping them be included in school more successfully. The data do not show significant changes made by the project. There were 12 teachers in October 2023 and 13 teachers in April 2024 who agreed that they helped their students develop their personalities and talents. Only three teachers in October 2023 and two in April 2024 denied that fact (see Figure 9). It can be concluded that most of the teachers try to communicate with their students in a way that helps them grow and use their advantages.

The final criterion (evaluated through Questions 10–12) examining the way teachers communicate with their students dealt with the improvement of students' quality of life. It has already been mentioned that the schools that participated in the research had many students with deviant behaviour. Therefore, the teachers had to assess if they discussed with their students their negative behaviour – lying, aggression, attendance problems, drug addiction, etc. The data prove that the teachers are not aware of this kind of communication, and the project has possibly made a positive impact on this issue. There were eight teachers, who agreed with the statement in October 2023, and nine teachers, who did the same in April 2024. At the beginning of the project, there were two teachers who neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, but at the end of the project, there were already five teachers, who did not have a strong opinion. Five teachers denied that way of communication in October 2023, and only one teacher did the same in April 2024 (see Figure 10). This means that teachers are possibly more concerned about the significance of discussing with their students the topics related to the quality of their lives.

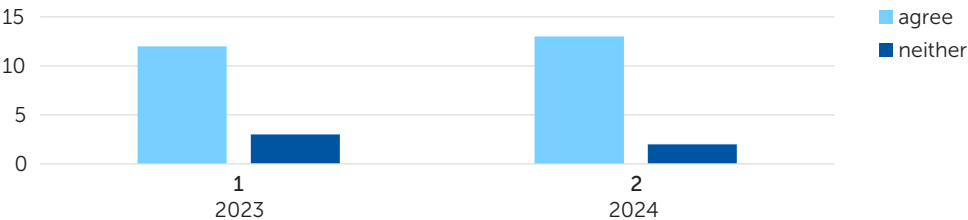


Figure 9 Responses to Question 9 "I help to develop my students' personality and talents (2023–2024)"



Figure 10 Responses to Question 10 "I discuss with my students their negative behaviour – lying, aggression, attendance problems, drug addiction, etc. (2023–2024)"

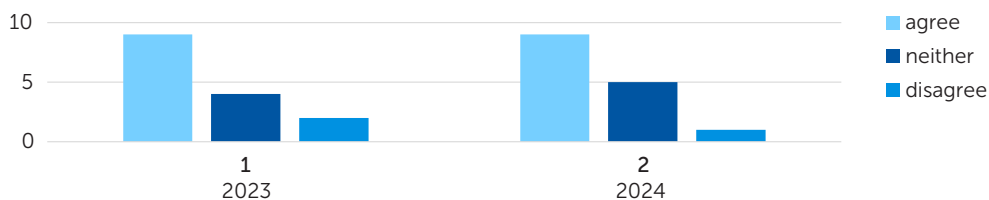


Figure 11 Responses to Question 11 "I try to popularize a healthy lifestyle to my students (2023–2024)"

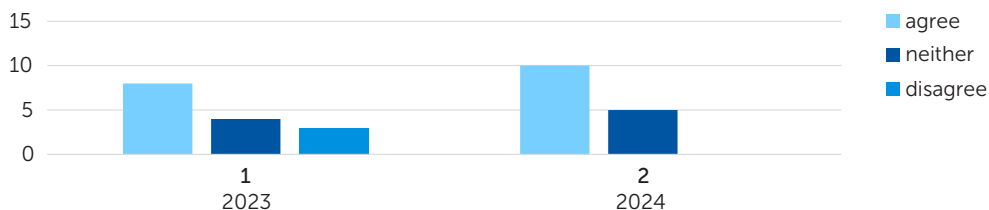


Figure 12 Responses to Question 12 "I try to discuss the impact of unhealthy lifestyle with my students (2023–2024)"

Teachers also had to evaluate if they tried to popularize a healthy lifestyle to their students. The data show that the problem with such a way of communication still exists. There were nine teachers, who agreed with this statement both in October 2023 and April 2024. However, the number of teachers who did not have a strong opinion was rather high – four teachers in October 2023 and five teachers in April neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The teachers who disagreed were not many – two teachers in October 2023 and one teacher in April 2024 (see Figure 11). It means that teachers should be more concerned about putting into practice such a way of communication.

The final statement assessed by the teachers dealt with communication when they tried to discuss with students the impact of an unhealthy lifestyle. The data show that the teachers are still rather unconcerned about the necessity to discuss such topics. Although eight teachers before the project and ten teachers after the project agreed with the following statement, the number of teachers who neither agreed nor disagreed was considerable, i.e., four teachers in October 2023 and five teachers in April 2024 (see Figure 12). The data also prove that the project may have positively affected teachers' communication, such that three teachers disagreed with the statement before the project, and none disagreed after the project.

Assessing project results, it is possible to conclude that teachers and the way they communicate can help students enhance their learning, inclusion, and school belonging, while also encouraging improvements in their overall quality of life.

Discussion

Successful communication between teachers and students is a key factor which can significantly improve students' learning outcomes as well as their interaction with teachers and peers. As stated by Nielsen and Shunk (2002, p.42) "learning is more effective when there is two-way communication". It means that both parts of communication process – teachers and students should be active. If there is only one part which dominates, then the other part stays passive. Thus, the communication process lacks productivity.

Apart from the communication between teachers and students, another type of communication – communication among peers is also important. According to the Mexican and British researchers Sylvia Rojas Drummond and Neil Mercas "peer – group interaction is also of a high importance" (2003, p.110). If the communication among peers is successful, it can lead to inclusive and positive atmosphere in the classroom. It means it is necessary for teachers to create such atmosphere at the classroom which can encourage all students to be active and included.

Sports and a healthy way of living are especially important for the students with a deviant behaviour because it can improve not only students' life quality but also their communication with teachers and peers. As stated by Diehl "playing sports involves group experience and a shared sense of achievement" (Diehl, et al., 2018, p.6). It means sports can increase students' self –esteem and help them be an active part of communication.

Conclusions

The project showed a tendency that there might have been an impact on the way teachers communicate, which could lead to the improvement of their students' learning results and behaviour, helping them to include and fit into the school. The project may have long-term results because

- a vast majority of teachers are critical when assessing and analysing their way of communication to help students diminish conflicts in the group and promote their trust in each other;
- most of the teachers who participated in the project consider cooperation and teamwork seriously, trying to diminish students' tendency to avoid communication and separation. Teachers try to help their students grow, use their pluses, and express their opinions. These steps can promote a democratic, inclusive, and friendly atmosphere at school;
- most teachers are concerned about the significance of discussing with their students the topics related to a better quality of their lives. However, the problem with such a way of communication still exists.

Thus, the research results prove that teachers' communication and cooperation may help their students reach better results in learning and progress in their behaviour, thereby enhancing students' inclusion and belonging to school. Therefore, it can be asserted that the quality of students' lives has the potential to change for the better.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Dr. sc. admin. Antra Roskosa and Mg. philol. Inese Kocote are the members of RTU teaching staff. The interests of their research focus on teacher professionalism, education management, multicultural class management, intercultural communication, as well as the aspects of technical translation.

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