



Issues on Effective Communication in Educational Administration: A Local Survey

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Abstract

This research paper presents the existing problems in the communication of educational directorates with their schools, through a survey conducted in the Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica, which is a local administrative agency of the Greek Ministry of Education. Local educational Directors, within their administrative duties, coordinate and guide the work of schools in the area of their authority and accountability. It is noted that there are often problems in the communication and therefore coordination of the educational Directorate with the schools of authority. For example, high-school principals and teachers complain that they often receive emails overdue. This research highlights aspects and dimensions of the problems and proposes actions required to solve them, as well as ways to address issues related to educational communication and the development of an effective communication system.

Keywords: Educational communication; Educational director; Network; Communication skills; Educational administration; Educational leadership.

1. Introduction

A school is neither a closed organization nor an inaccessible and bureaucratic agency of the state. In order to achieve the improvement of the provided educational work, a school is necessary to constantly communicate with the educational authorities, namely herein, the local secondary education Directorate (henceforth simply “the Directorate”) of Western Attica (Greece), as well as with other schools. The objective and all-round information of each school on everything that matters about it, as well as its wider cooperation with the Directorate, with other schools or social institutions and the networking of educational institutes achieves the extroversion of school and the improvement of the quality of educational services (Athanasoula-Reppa, 1999). In addition, modern bibliography highlights the multiple benefits of adopting an “open-door” system. Communication is messaging or a two-way flow of information between two or more people, through which relationships are developed (Kokkos, 1999). It appears both at the interpersonal level and at the level of organizations and involves the transmission or reception of information-messages, through a system of symbols, such as language, shapes, gestures, etc. (Athanasoula-Reppa, 1999). It should be clarified that the communication of a Directorate with its schools is a prerequisite for cooperation and is related to the exchange of information, the documentation and the joint actions (Bourantas, 2001). In particular, it is pointed out in the bibliography that communication at the workplace is very important, because it is organized by a group of people “belonging to different social and professional environments in order to achieve the same goals” (Adu-Oppong and Agyin-Birikorang, 2014). The effective operation of each organization requires:

- the promotion of positive interpersonal relationships between the organization itself and its employees,
- the organizing of an appropriate attitude and
- the creation of an open and clear communication between them.

It helps coordinate activities and achieve the organization’s goals. It is also noted that it is not just an effort to communicate, but a collective effort for effective co-operation, which opposes the forces of indifference and the marginalization of important human resources and talents; an effort based on self-management and a cooperation that goes beyond local, regional and even national boundaries. It develops relations of supra-territorial solidarity that enrich and empower the popular and democratic communities, by exchanging, distributing, separating and composing ideas, activities and arts (Dedousopoulos, 1997). It is regarded as an element of a generalized effort by individuals, networks, groups, relations and technology to deal with problems that have long since ceased to be national exclusive ones and resolving them requires coordination of actions at local, national and supranational levels, as social exclusion is needed to be limited.

This essential communication of the Directorate is called upon to play a key role in these circumstances and often needs to take the initiative for starting the relevant procedures. The latter is of particular importance, because having a differentiated view (in relation to ordinary ones) in terms of the composition and operation of collaborative schemes can work effectively:

- as incentives for encouraging local actors to actively engage and be socially activated on specific issues;

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- for avoiding authoritarian and hierarchical forms of partnership organization, especially if they are structured in cooperation with public sector agencies;
- for ensuring the involvement of those social groups directly concerned in solving the problems of the specific partnerships.

It thus contributes to the widening of the sensitivities of local societies and local actors in relation to their pupils and their families, in particular, and the local socio-cultural development of an anthropocentric nature that tends to reduce inequalities and exclusions (Passy, 2001). More broadly, this is a role that can be taken over by the network, a role locally visible, recognizable and controlled, contributing to awareness-raising and motivation activities of the local society and the entire educational community about the philosophy, content, goals and expected results of education, as well as ways of initiating the aforementioned networking and voluntary activation, with maximum use of technology.

In this context, the role of the Director is defined, in determining the “open” communication climate in the school environment (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2008). He/she is responsible for informing teachers about the decisions of the senior educational leaders and their proper implementation. He/she also informs the members of the educational community about the school’s operating framework and about the obligations arising from the educational process (Mylona, 2005).

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to find out if there are any problems with the coordination and communication of the Directorate with the schools and what actions are implemented by the educational managers in order to achieve an effective communication system.

2.1. Sample and Sampling

The participants in the survey were a small number of teachers who, at the time of its conduct, were serving at the schools the Directorate. The selection of participants was “deliberate” and targeted. The stratified sampling was applied (Papageorgiou, 2015; Pappas, 2002). Subpopulations, in which the population was divided, were classified into the following groups (“strata”) based on certain features. These strata were:

- The type of school (general senior high-school, vocational high-school).
- The job position (Principal).

It was then ensured that the sample of this survey included educators of different age groups, educational background, social and family status of both genders (Male, Female).

2.2. Research Questions

- (1) What problems do exist in the coordination and communication of the Directorate with its schools?
- (2) Which are their dimensions and their extent?
- (3) Which are their causes?
- (4) Which actions are implemented by the educational managers, in order to have an effective communication system?
- (5) What proposals do they have for improving the communication of their schools?

2.3. Selection of Research Method

In this primary research, the dynamic and flexible qualitative method was used. It was considered more appropriate because of its objectives (Kvale, 1996), but also its inter-thematic character, since its content is a field of study of different sciences (Banister *et al.*, 1994). This research focuses on “how” and “why” (Iosifidis, 2003), it is naturalistic and authentic, since it is applied in real conditions. It studies what is happening in school reality without trying to control it Isari and Pourkos (2015). It penetrated into the personality of subjects and revealed their experiences (Papageorgiou, 1998) without cost. Teachers reflected on their attitudes and perceptions of the anxiety that they experience daily, in relation to the performance of their pupils.

2.4. Collection of Primary Data

The site of this research was the physical site of the subjects, namely, the schools of the Directorate, but also the premises of the Directorate itself (Glasser and Strauss, 1967; Papaioannou *et al.*, 1996). Its implementation time was in May 2018, after school hours. The multidimensional approach (mixed method) was applied, by conducting six semi-structured interviews, face-to-face on a selected sample, based on semi-structured questions. This method is appropriate for the collection of primary data, as the data are collected through personal contact by the same researcher, which guarantees the proper selection of population. Flexibility was achieved (Kyriazi, 2001), as the researcher had the opportunity to modify the exploratory direction for enriching the research data, following on interesting responses and exploring subjects’ motivations; activities that are not realized with other qualitative research techniques, such as questionnaires. In particular, a semi-structured discussion guide was used, as the researcher added appropriate clarifying questions that had not been determined in advance, but were derived from the subjects’ answers, to extract additional information, achieving in this way the clarity and the breadth of the data. The questions were properly reformulated to smoothly guide the subjects to a greater depth. At the same time, issues emerged during the discussion (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989) were clarified, to facilitate interaction and deepen of what the subjects of the research supported. Practical issues had been settled before the interviews took place. They

were preceded by telephone communication with the subjects of the survey, where the date and time of their conduct that was convenient for them was precisely defined. Access to the school area or to the Directorate itself had been ensured.

2.5. Credibility and Validity

The credibility of this qualitative research has been ensured in relation to the methodological planning and the quality of data that proves to be true and trustworthy findings. In particular, the provisions made were the following ones:

- The adherence to the criterion of prolonged engagement with the research field; the researchers who have conducted this research have a lot of educational experience, have devoted enough time to the topic under investigation and have had a long lasting collaboration with the educators, who are the sample of this research.
- The verification of the data; the primary data, as well as their interpretation after the completion of their collection, were given to the subjects of this survey, in order to verify their credibility.
- The detailed examination of remarkable evidence of this research, by a colleague with experience in conducting educational research; the research methodology and the interview guide was reviewed by an experienced, high-qualified teacher, who was not aware of this research, in order to check its methodology before applying it.

2.6. Ethics

Since primary data collection was conducted in this survey, the basic principle of voluntary participation was respected. For this reason, the subjects of this survey, before the start of the interview, were informed that they may not respond. Moreover, a consent form was issued and used, which was read and signed by them before the interview. In order to ensure the scientific correctness of the data collected as well as the respect and protection of the dignity of the respondents, the necessary telephone communication with the teachers, who were the sample of this survey, had been preceded. During this communication, they were briefed on the subject of the interview and on the ethics to be applied.

3. Results and Discussion

The processing of the interviews revealed that there were several problems in the coordination and communication of the Directorate with its schools. The relevant legislation that institutionalized the electronic way of communication and documents' transmission through internet is implemented, both between the state agencies and between agencies and citizens, in order to simplify and accelerate procedures, reduce operating costs and achieve better communication with the citizens. Among the problems that exist though are the occasionally problematic operation of the educational network, the lack of technological equipment and modern information technology (IT) equipment. Because of the financial crisis, no equipment has been procured by the Greek Ministry of Education recently, while limited funds have been respectively available by local sources (mainly municipalities).

It has also been found that although schools use e-mail regularly, there are teachers, usually having more years of educational experience, who do not know other ways of effective networking and effective communication other than e-mail. It should be noted that an increasing number of training sessions were held in the previous school-year (2018) for teachers, regarding the exploitation and implementation of digital technologies in the teaching process. This is a project implemented on behalf of the Greek Ministry of Education and gives the opportunity to teachers of all disciplines to understand how they can use new technologies in their daily practice. In addition, another problem that has been noticed is that although there are e-mail messages addressed to the teachers, they are not received by them because there is no staff available to read the messages and make the appropriate forwarding arrangements.

Among the actions implemented by the principals, in order to have an effective communication system between their school and the Directorate, is that most documents are posted mainly on the Directorate's website or, more rarely (concerning financial issues), on other educational websites. There have been principals who have agreed with what is mentioned in the relevant bibliography, presenting and stressing the need to apply other ways of synchronous and asynchronous communication, the creation of internet networks that respond to the modern needs of schools, not only for handling cases but also for exchanging views, to coordinate actions of common interest, to seek support, good practices and alternatives for dealing with common problems.

Therefore, innovative modes of communicating have been proposed by principals with long experience and IT knowledge. The Directorate can communicate not only asynchronously, with an email message through a list of recipients, but also through asynchronous forums on topics that need to be addressed by schools. Additionally, video-conferencing (e.g., via Google Plus, Skype, Moodle or the IT platform of the Greek Ministry of Education) has been recommended for urgent and/or ambiguous issues. The corresponding entries may form a cognitive database, with the contribution of all members of the network. For synchronous communication, video-conferencing can be utilized (via the previous IT platforms) and it is possible to serve up to 10 persons at the same time, by a single platform. This number increases with the simultaneous utilization of more IT platforms. For this purpose, a link from the central website of the Directorate to video-conferencing rooms is available. During synchronous meetings, documents posted to an IT platform (e.g., Google Docs) can be shared.

4. Conclusion

The methodology of this applied research approach is considered to be appropriate and documented. The methods of its implementation, the sample and the sampling have been determined in details and sufficiently. This survey not only contributes to describing, predicting and interpreting the studied phenomenon, but also concludes with realistic proposals, with solutions to immediate and practical problems, in order to reduce the impact of the phenomenon and improve the quality of education (Creswell, 2011).

The results of this survey revealed shortcomings in the ways schools communicate with the Directorate, which they are subject to, because of the economic crisis. The references to the need for an effective way of achieving communication were confirmed. However, the thorough and in-depth approach to the subject in this survey has highlighted innovative proposals for strengthening the collaborations and extroversion activities of schools. These innovations make use of modern IT achievements in the daily communication of schools. Future research efforts may focus on assessing the effectiveness of each of the afore-mentioned innovative proposals for synchronous and asynchronous communication.

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