PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE AS A RHETORICAL CHALLENGE IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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Abstract/Izvleček
This paper analyses educator's communication skills during parent-teacher conferences in kindergarten. We researched the way educators communicate during twelve parent-teacher conferences in various kindergartens. In accordance with the methodology of qualitative research, chosen elements of educator's communication during the parent-teacher conferences were observed and recorded. Results showed that observed parent-teacher conferences are well-prepared, structured, substantially suitable and interactive, with apt vocabulary and elements of eloquence. The greatest shortcoming of the educator's communication was an underdeveloped active listening technique. Moreover, there were obvious differences in individual communication skills of the educators. The results of this research can serve as a tool for contemplating pedagogical practice in early childhood education.

Starševski sestanek kot retorični izziv v vzgojni praksi
V članku analiziramo komunikacijske sposobnosti vzgojiteljev/vzgojiteljic med starševskimi sestanki v vrtcih. V skladu z metodologijo kvalitativnega raziskovanja smo opazovali in zabeležili izbrane elemente komunikacije zaposlenih med 12 starševskimi sestanki v različnih vrtcih. Rezultati so pokazali, da so bili opazovani starševski sestanki dobro pripravljeni, strukturirani, primerni in interaktivni, izvedeni z ustreznim besediščem in elementi učinkovite govorne komunikacije. Največja pomanjkljivost komunikacije zaposlenih je bila nerazvita tehnika aktivnega poslušanja. Prav tako so bile očitne razlike v individualnih komunikacijskih spretnostih zaposlenih. Rezultati te raziskave lahko služijo kot orodje za razmišljanje o pedagoški praksi pri zgodnjem učenju in poučevanju.

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Introduction

An educator's profession manifests as relentless communication. First and foremost, it is communication with children (talking, storytelling, explaining, directing, describing etc.), but also with children's parents (when they bring their children to the facility or pick them up at the end of the day, during individual consultations or parent-teacher conferences etc.), with other members of the educational facility they work in (co-workers, various professionals, associates etc.) and with members of the local community (during collaborations in preparing public events or out-of-the-classroom activities etc.). The profession of educator therefore demands a high level of rhetorical and communication skills, which can be challenging or even difficult for some, especially in the area of cooperation with parents. Communication between educator and parents is a key factor in the quality of education in kindergarten. Research on the quality of kindergarten from the perspective of parents (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010) showed that, in addition to informal forms of communication and cooperation (such as short conversations between educators and parents on the arrival or departure of children), parent-teacher conferences are key factors in parental perception of kindergarten quality. In many of the communicational and performative tasks of educators, collaboration with parents seems to be the most challenging task (Ozman et al., 2016). Teachers point out that holding parent-teacher conferences is a special challenge if the parents have had a previous negative experience (Irvin et al. 2009). Therefore, to establish effective communication between educators and parents, one must work on it from the beginning of that interaction (Reardon, 1998; Bryan and Lynette, 2012). A well-prepared parent-teacher conference can become a more effective exchange when parents feel invited and encouraged to attend, which is necessary for their active participation in the conference (Stevens and Tollafield, 2003). Educators often find parent-teacher conferences stressful, tiring, and time consuming (Lemmer, 2012; Modrej and Cugmas 2015). Hence, educators bear the important task of continuously developing and broadening their communication skills (Graham-Clay, 2005). This is an essential tool for educators who want to be on good terms with parents, because choosing the right communication pattern helps in achieving one's goals, while also respecting other people's wishes and goals (Hargie, 2004).

Educators are public speakers because no matter whom they address, whether a child, a parent or a co-worker, their goal is to persuade another person about something, to share their ideas, views and thoughts with them (Petek, 2013, 2014). Furthermore, educators, just like public speakers, "perform" in front of an audience – they carefully prepare certain materials and share the information, while also being eager to convince their audience of their ideas, make an impression and be remembered. All this demands that educators have good communication skills and that they understand the rules of rhetoric.

The parent-teacher conference is a form of teacher collaboration with parents that takes place several times in the pedagogical year. It is an event at which parents are informed about their children's accomplishments, their behaviour at school/kindergarten, as well as the plans and activities, and deals with educating parents about pedagogical practices. Parent-teacher conferences can be classified according to various criteria, for example, the number of participants, the topic, the meeting style, set goals etc. There are conferences where goals include informing the parents about new topics, conferences where parents share parenting experiences and improve their parenting skills, conferences where the goal is simply hanging out with the children etc. Some parent-teacher conferences can be similar to classes and workshops; some can be demonstrational or communicational. Different types of parent-teacher conferences require different preparation methods and a level of communication skill on the part of educators (Milanović et al., 2014). For example, demonstrational parent-teacher conferences, in which the main goal is socialization of parents and children, are occasions with which many educators feel sufficiently confident because they are doing what they usually do. For parent-teacher conferences in the form of workshops, educators can turn to experts in various appropriate professions, whereas communicational parent-teacher conferences are considered the greatest challenge for educators. Communicational conferences require educators to have developed public speaking and presentation skills, as well as debating and organizational skills to initiate two-way communication during parent-teacher conferences (Rađenović and Smiljanić, 2007). Educators must also be prepared for disagreeing with parents, as it is unlikely that every parent will accept and approve of an educator's ideas, suggestions, or decisions.

The quality and success of the parent-teacher conference greatly depend on the educator's preparedness for the meeting (Graham-Clays, 2005). The fact that educators are mostly acquainted with their audience makes preparation easier.

Therefore, if they are organizing a communicational parent-teacher conference, they know how to distribute the parents in groups so as to avoid a situation in which nobody from a group wants to talk, or where there is a group in which everyone talks too much.

While organizing the meeting, the educator must plan for the duration of the meeting. Long speeches are tiring for any audience. In time-management, it is crucial to secure time for parents to process and summarize the given information, or to share their own ideas and points of view.

When preparing a parent-teacher conference, an educator must pay attention to the structure, which should reflect the rhythm of any conversation: it should have a beginning, development of the topic and an end (Juul, 2002), i.e., an introduction, core elements and a conclusion. The introduction has the role of motivating the audience to receive the message, introducing them to the topic of the conference, announcing key points and placing the topic into broader context (Škarić, 2000). The middle part is where all the main points are argued and where it becomes clear how developed the educator's communication skills really are (Škarić, 2000). Although it is extremely important to motivate parents to participate actively in parent-teacher conferences, and to give them a chance to express their opinions and comment on the topic, every person needs to have the choice to be active or passive in any form of communication. The educator needs to create her/his own way of motivating parents to participate in communication. Finally, before the end of the parent-teacher conference, it is important to analyse and briefly summarize all the main points, thank parents for coming, for their input and participation, and end the meeting with a closure (Škarić, 2000). Speaking style is as important as the topic (Gnjato, 2003). Speaking style is characterized by elements of expression: clarity, fluency, appropriate language and using correct terminology, but also by elements of speech: intensity, intonation, and tempo. Moreover, the educator's communication takes place in a public facility where children are being educated, so their speech must align with standard language, without using jargon, dialect, vernacular, etc. The capacity to know and use expressive elements of speech (core values of speech), which are dynamic, intonation, and speed of articulation, is also of utmost importance (Škarić, 2000).

To explore the communication and rhetorical aspect of parent-teacher conferences, we researched the way educators communicated during twelve parent-teacher conferences in various kindergartens. Results are discussed in the following part of this paper.

Rhetorical challenges in parent-teacher conference practice – a research overview

In this study, we sought to establish whether educators were aware of the importance and potential of good communication. We conducted research on 26 educators during 12 parent-teacher conferences in five early education facilities in Zagreb throughout June and September 2019. The sample for this study was non-probabilistic. Part of the sample was obtained by sending a request for participation to the e-mail addresses of principals and counsellors of early education facilities (kindergartens). Because data collection in this way was slow, most of the sample was collected using the "snowball technique". Educators or counsellors who agreed to conduct research contacted other institutions and suggested other educators. The study was conducted with the consent of the principal and the educator. The final sample was diverse in types of parent-teacher conferences. Most of the conferences were informational, two of them had a specific topic, while only one parent-teacher conference was communicational. Although the sample was homogeneous according to gender criteria, both male and female educators had equal opportunities to participate in the study. At the beginning of the parent-teacher conference, it was noted whether the educators had a master's degree in early and preschool education. In a sample of 26 educators at 12 parent-teacher conferences, only 3 had a master's degree in early and preschool education, while 23 had bachelor's degrees. Most parent-teacher conferences were attended by two educators (10). Only two were attended by three educators.

Research methodology

In accordance with the problem, we decided to do qualitative research and designed a monitoring scale especially for this study in order to systematically observe the variables. The scale "Educator's speech at the parent- teacher conference" has two parts: the first part of the scale consists of 13 statements and one sub statement, which helped us in determining the structure of the parent-teacher conference and the level of the educator's speech preparedness.

The second part of the scale measured the professionalism and flexibility of educators' communication using a three-degree Likert scale with negative polarization, and that part consists of 12 statements. Number 1 indicated the highest negative value (the absence of a certain phenomenon – never), while number 3 indicated the highest positive value – often.

The first half of the initial part of the scale related to the structure of the parent-teacher conference and consisted of seven statements, covering topics such as the presence or absence of greetings at the beginning and end of the conference, announcement of conference duration etc. (Table 1). The other half consisted of six statements on the fluency of the educator's speech. Others involved the use of assisting tools during the presentation, taking notes during the conference and reading from prepared notes (Table 2). The statements in the first part of the scale (13) had the characteristic of a test because a choice between confirmation or negation (represented or not represented) was offered. The second part of the scale focused on the communication itself, its expertise and adaptability. Some of the twelve statements that were measured were the intonation, speed and volume of the educator's speech, the presence of an active listening technique, and the frequency of using professional terminology or jargon in the educator's speech. A detailed presentation of the second part of the monitoring scale can be found in Table 3. At the end of the second part of the scale, we left space for notes, which proved useful during data analysis. Using the evaluation scale, we monitored the conference in progress without intervening or participating, and we noted representations or the lack of certain evaluation elements, as well as the frequency of certain phenomena that occur throughout communication.

Before the start of the parent-teacher conference, the educators were informed about the purpose and course of the research. They were also informed about the confidentiality of the data and the anonymity of the report. After the introductory information, the educators signed an agreement confirming that they were familiar with the details of the research, with which they agreed. In the introductory part of the parent-teacher conference, the educators introduced the researcher to the parents, or the researcher introduced himself and asked for their consent to conduct the study. At all parent-teacher conferences, the parents agreed that the study could be carried out. We tried to make the presence of the researcher at the conferences as inconspicuous as possible in order to keep conditions as natural as possible.

After the researcher was introduced at the beginning of the parent-teacher conference, he was present only as an observer and did not participate in interaction at the conferences.

The gathered data were divided into three groups according to the three questions that the research posed:

1. Do educators recognize the importance of well-structured parent-teacher conferences?
2. How well-prepared are these educators for speaking at the parent-teacher conference, and how much do they rely on their notes?
3. To what extent does the educator's speech deviate from the vocabulary of an educated and professional speaker?

The data were subsequently categorized for each statement to yield final frequencies. The part of the scale in which notes were added freely was cleared, and we kept only the notes that had proven to be significant and useful to the research.

Results, analysis and discussion

1. Parent-teacher conference structure

The first question of the research sought to understand whether educators recognized structure as an important part of a parent-teacher conference, as well as how much attention was paid to each of the structural parts of the conference (greeting, acknowledgement, announcements about conference duration and planned content, conclusion, and closure). The results show that all parent-teacher conferences open with a greeting. However, at only two conferences did the educator greet the parents as "Dear parents", as opposed to other conferences where the educators used neutral greetings such as "I wish you all a good evening", or "First, I would like to greet all of you." In most conferences (8/12), educators thanked everyone for coming. These results match Juul (2002) and Milanović et al. (2014), who emphasized the importance of the greeting as a sign of the educator's politeness, as well as the recognition of greeting as a tool for establishing communication with the parents, whose help and collaboration is invaluable.

The introductory part of the parent-teacher conference was monitored through the statement in which the educators announce the meeting's duration, and checked whether the given time frame was respected in practice.

Research shows that awareness is low among educators about time frames, announcing the meeting's duration, and respecting given timelines. The data says that duration was announced at only three parent-teacher conferences. In most of the other parent-teacher conferences, the duration was not announced, although the conference did not exceed the expected time frame (an hour or slightly longer). There was, however, one conference which lasted significantly longer, around two-and-a-half hours, which negatively affected parental motivation and attention.

This example shows that a small number of educators remains unaware of the importance of planning the duration of parent-teacher conferences, and respecting time frames, and that some educators cannot summarize and focus strictly on the topics from the conference's agenda. Also, during two parent-teacher conferences in which the educator failed to announce the duration time, some parents explicitly asked about the conference's duration. The statement about announcing the planned content of the parent-teacher conference was used to question the conference's structure. Although the answer is mostly affirmative (at 9 out of 12 conferences the educators announced what would be discussed), at one conference a parent asked the question directly, and the educator stated they would discuss it later in the meeting.

The conclusion of the educator's public speech at the parent-teacher conference is very important. Nonetheless, the gathered data show that the educators are slightly less aware of that fact.

Even though all but one parent-teacher conference ended with saying goodbye, only four conferences had a conclusion element where the educator summarized all that had been said in the meeting, and none of the meetings had an effective and memorable closure to leave an impression on the audience (parents). These data show that the parent-teacher conferences are mostly structured, but some parts are more elaborate than others. These educators understand the value of an introductory element but are still unaware that the ending is equally important. Table 1 shows the results that are considered useful and valuable.

Table 1: Parent-teacher conference structure

	YES	P-T conference (P1-P12)	NO	P-T conference (P1-P12)
The educator greets the parents at the beginning	12	everyone	-	-
"Dear parents"	2	P9, P11	10	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P12
"Respected parents"	0	no one	12	everyone
The educator thanks the parents for their response	8	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10, P11	4	P1, P7, P8, P12
The educator states the duration of the parent-teacher conference	3	P8, P10, P11	9	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P12
The duration time of the parent-teacher conference is in sync with the announced time of duration	3	P8, P10, P11	1	P3
The educator briefly lists the topic of the parent-teacher conference	9	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P9, P10, P12	3	P7, P8, P11
The educator ends the parent-teacher conference with a conclusion	4	P7, P10, P11, P12	8	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9
The educator ends the parent-teacher conference with a closing	11	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12	1	P7

2. Speech preparedness at parent-teacher conferences

One of the factors for evaluation of advance preparation for parent-teacher conferences is monitoring the use of assisting tools, such as a projector, notes, brochures etc. (Škarić, 2000; Graham-Clay, 2005; Rađenović and Smiljanić, 2007). We found that many educators use assisting tools in conferences, in 11 out of 12 instances, while only one conference was held without any assisting tools. However, the tools in most frequent use are the educator's notes on paper (during seven conferences), while computers were used slightly less often (during four conferences)

This finding confirms other findings (Plazar, 2010) on the underrepresentation of digital technology in the work of educators, which may be influenced by various factors (e.g., lack or inadequacy of technique, lack of time, lack of skills). Nevertheless, another reason behind the choice to use or not use assisting tools might be the type of parent-teacher conference.

Having in mind that only two of the conferences were themed, and the educators' used computers in both, we can conclude that computers or projectors are used when content is new or unfamiliar to the parents, or for photographs and videos of the activities they talk about but cannot perform.

Furthermore, in conferences where computers or projectors were used, we also paid attention to whether educators named the sources for the information or the materials they provided, as well as noting their ability to summarize the content.

The results show that at both themed meetings, the educators understood the importance of a brief presentation of the written content, but in neither meeting did they state sources for the information. We might therefore conclude that educators have slightly less awareness of the importance of giving references in their presentations. Again, it is important to emphasize that two parent-teacher conferences are too small a sample to draw conclusions.

To make a better impression during presentations, it is advisable for the prepared content to be spoken as well as shown (Škarić, 2000). These scientific findings proved to be true in our research. In eight parent-teacher conferences the educators spoke while occasionally glancing at their notes, and in four conferences, they read the prepared content to the audience. On the other hand, taking notes during meetings was less common. Although educators took notes during three parent-teacher conferences, this does not show that they were unaware of the benefits of note-taking. To elaborate, most of the monitored parent-teacher conferences were informative, which meant that educators informed the parents about various topics, and parents were the ones taking the notes because of the nature of the conferences in question. That is why the incompatibility of the data on this statement might be caused by the type of conferences.

We can conclude that most of the educators come to parent-teacher conferences and speak well prepared, they are not nervous during conferences, and they feel confident as speakers and hosts. This can be the result of good preparation, which consequently makes them more skilled at public speaking.

In support of this are findings by Škarić (2000), who discusses anxiety and fear of public speaking, along with other findings (Modrej and Cugmas, 2015) that the preparation and implementation of a parent meeting can be very stressful. Educators who are not skilled public speakers will be more insecure, as well as those who did not prepare well or those who have a speech impediment (Škarić, 2000).

Furthermore, educators are aware that their fear is visible to their audience (the parents) because it manifests as a quiet or trembling voice, an uncontrolled pace and rhythm of speaking, pauses, errors, repetition etc., which makes them even more anxious. If we add the presence of a researcher, no matter how invisible they tried to be, the anxiety soars, and it is completely normal to feel it. Regardless of the educator's confidence in their role as host, fear of public speaking can be reduced through exercises, preparation and experience. Therefore, Caspe (2003) proposes educational programs for teachers/educators that actively encourage the development of communication skills. Furthermore, Lemmer (2012) points out that institutions should provide guidelines for teachers to improve parent-teacher conferences and hold regular in-service training on developing communication skills. Minke and Anderson (2003) discuss the lack of training for educators before and during their service and development of their communication skills for conducting parent-teacher conferences. Table 2 shows the final data on speech preparedness at parent-teacher conferences.

Table 2: Speech preparedness at parent-teacher conferences

	YES	Notes	Computer, projector	P-T conference (P1-P12)	NO	P-T conference (P1-P12)
The educator uses assisting tools during their presentation (projector, notes)	11	7	**4**	P1, P2, P3, P5	1	P4
The notes contain sources for the given information	**-**	-	-	-	2	P1, P5
The educator reads from their notes or presentation text	**4**	2	2	P3, P5, P6, P12	-	-
The educator is well prepared and only occasionally, or not at all, glances at their notes	8	-	-	P1, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12	4	P1, P7, P8, P12
The text on the presentation is concise	**2**	-	2	P1, P5	-	-
The educator takes notes during the parent-teacher conference	**3**	-	-	P9, P10, P11	**9**	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P12

3. *The educator's speaking style*

The final statement in the study aimed at analysing the educator's speech, i.e., its rhetorical and other qualities, such as dynamism, speed, and intonation, the educator's communication skills, use of technology, active listening etc. We measured the final data using a three-degree Likert scale. The first statement that dealt with this question dealt with the use of terminology in the educator's speech.

During seven out of twelve parent-teacher conferences, the educators did not use professional terminology. In the other five meetings, such terminology was used occasionally (e.g., *regressive behaviour*), and in four out of five, the educators explained the meaning of the terms. Less representation of professional terminology in educator's speeches can be understood in more than one way.

The first explanation for this would be that the educators find their audience to be uneducated in their field and feel that professional terminology might be confusing. This explanation is also backed in previous research done by Milanović et al. (2014), where it is stated that speech should be adjusted to the varying educational level of the audience. Moreover, the results may be explained by the small number of these parent-teacher conferences in which the topic required the use of professional terminology (only two such conferences). Some authors (Daly and Vangelisti 2003) agree that using professional terminology is justified if it is needed to explain a new topic or problem, but all new terms should be explained to avoid misunderstanding. This view is shared by Ozmen et al. (2016), emphasizing that the use of professional terminology without explanation represents a communication barrier.

On the other hand, the lack of professional terminology in educators' speeches could also be seen as incompetence. We can ask ourselves if these results are due to the type of parent-teacher conference, or if the educators are unaware of the importance of using professional terminology when giving a speech to parents.

We also explored whether educators' speech was executed according to the standard Croatian language norm, where we paid attention to their use of jargon, dialect or vernacular language varieties. The results are ambiguous: we noted occasional use of non-standard expressions by educators in six parent-teacher conferences; in five conferences, there was no deviation from the norm, while in one particular conference the educator often used jargon.

In analysing the communication skills of educators, we used a set of questions about communication with parents, encouraging them to share their opinions and comment on the topic.

The final data confirms a high level of educator awareness about eliciting communication among parents, which was seen in all conferences. These educators encouraged communication occasionally in seven parent-teacher conferences, while in the remaining five conferences, they did it more often. However, the ways in which communication was encouraged varied significantly.

Most commonly, educators asked direct questions that parents were expected to answer. In a similar way, they sought parent's feedback and opinion on certain topics. In seven parent-teacher conferences, the educator explicitly asked parents for their opinion occasionally; in four conferences they requested it frequently, and in one conference such motivation was not present. However, the data on analysing the clarity of the information educators provided for parents are somewhat different. Even though in eight parent-teacher conferences the educators regularly checked if their message was understood, in four conferences the educators did not check at all whether they had been understood. Understanding the message is essential for keeping the parents' attention. Unfortunately, parents are shy and anxious about speaking at parent-teacher conferences, and these feelings are exacerbated if they are not offered a chance to speak by the educator. In all cases when parents expressed their thoughts and opinions, the educators reacted positively; they were calm and did not get annoyed or distressed.

Besides leaving enough time for questions and answers, it is important to allow for pauses within an educator's speech to encourage communication by the parents and to enhance the time required to process and understand information. Seven parent-teacher conferences had pauses in the speech, while the other five did not. Only two conferences had regular pauses.

Another important element of educator communication that we analysed in our research was the ability to actively listen to the speaking parent. Even though in ten parent-teacher conferences educators listened to parents, the results are compromised by the fact that in half the conferences, educators interrupted the parents as they were talking. This shows that even though educators are aware of the benefits and importance of an active listening technique, they have not quite mastered it.

A set of questions about the intonation, speed, and dynamism of educator's speeches aimed to analyse their awareness of speech expressiveness. It turned out that educators were most sensitive about speech dynamism. In all but one parent-teacher conference, we noted an adjustment of speech dynamism by the educators.

This implies that the educators were aware that they needed to be heard even by those in the back of the room. Moreover, in all conferences, we noted that the speech intonation varied. It was usually a moderate change (in nine conferences).

In one conference, the educator's speech was often too fast, which can be explained by the educator's anxiety. Accordingly, great excitement or fear during the parent-teacher conference can lead to a delivery being too quiet, or (as in this case) too fast. All this enables us to answer the third research question, i.e., to conclude that educators do try to speak eloquently, professionally, and with expression. They cautiously, but skilfully use professional terminology, they rarely use jargon, and their speech is of moderate tempo and dynamic. Educators understand the importance of including parents in conversation, so they often ask for parental opinion and commentary.

However, educators are slightly less aware of the importance of checking whether their speech was clear or not. Also, they should pay more attention to pauses in their speech, while also working on their active listening.

Table 3: The educator's speaking style at parent-teacher conferences

	Never	Sometimes	Often
The educator uses professional terminology in communication at parent-teacher conferences	7	5	-
The educator explains the meaning of professional terms	1 (P5)	4	-
The educator uses jargon in communication at parent-teacher conferences	5	6	1
The educator makes regular pauses in their speech so that parents can easily follow	5	5	2 (P1, P5)
The educator incites communication	-	7	5
- By asking questions	-	8	4
- By asking for feedback/commentary	1 (P5)	7	4
- By asking if everything is clear	4	6	2
The educator actively listens to parents when they speak	0	2	10
The educator interrupts parents when they speak	6	6	-
The educator becomes irritated by parents' questions	12	-	-
The educator changes their intonation while speaking	-	9	3
The educator speaks fast	7	4	1 (P12)
The educator speaks slowly	9	3	-
The educator speaks loud enough for everyone to hear	-	1	11

Conclusion

The study presented in this paper was conducted during twelve parent-teacher conferences in kindergartens in Zagreb, Croatia, where twenty-six educators participated as hosts, to determine whether educators were aware of the rhetorical element of their speaking performance during parent-teacher conferences. Results show that parent-teacher conferences are usually well-structured: they have a clear beginning, middle and end. However, some parts of the conferences are more elaborate than others: educators pay more attention to planning the introductory part of the parent-teacher conferences than they do for the end. Furthermore, educators are less aware of the temporal aspect of the conferences: they rarely set a timeline for parent-teacher conferences. Also, the educators did not improvise; their speeches were well prepared, and they glanced at their notes either occasionally, or not at all. Using computers or other assisting tools is uncommon. If they use presentations, the content on the slides is usually concise, but they do not give the source of the information. Finally, the educators' speeches are in accord with standard pronunciation; they use appropriate vocabulary, although the use of vernacular or jargon was noted in some speeches. The educators articulate correctly, their dynamic and tempo of speaking are appropriate, as well as the intonation. Professional terminology is used cautiously and not very often. What is especially encouraging is the two-way communication the educators try to establish with the parents. Still, the active listening technique is something that most educators lack, which is a significant downside of most parent-teacher conferences because the educators tend to interrupt the parents before they finish what they have to say. Further research is needed to understand the reasons for the underdeveloped skill of active listening in many educators, because the skill of active listening is a complex ability that includes factors of communication competence, but also social and emotional factors in the personality of an educator.

One limitation of this research is that educators from institutions in which research was conducted were chosen by the kindergarten principals or professional associates, so it is unclear whether the participants were representative of the whole profession, or if they were chosen as individuals who would best represent the kindergarten.

Also, we cannot disregard the possible subjectivity of the researcher in detecting and evaluating the data. It is obvious, nonetheless, that a sample of twelve parent-teacher conferences is insufficient to draw conclusions about the whole population of educators.

That is why further research is advised, to be conducted on a greater number of educators and with the tracking of conferences on a more systematic level, since the findings might be even more useful for understanding the issues introduced in this paper.

However, despite the limitations, the results of this research can be useful in pedagogy theory, as well as in practice. The results give educators insight into important structural features of parent-teacher conferences, but also pinpoint which elements constitute good communication at these conferences. Educators, therefore, have a chance to evaluate their own communication with parents at the conferences and improve those elements that could be better, or the quality of their verbal communication at parent-teacher conferences.

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