La auto-revelación del maestro en el proceso de enseñanza: Comparación de perspectivas de estudiantes y maestros de nivel medio superior

Teacher's Self-disclosure in the Educational Process: Comparing Perspectives of 10th and 11th Grade Students and their Teachers

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Resumen

La auto-revelación del maestro es uno de los factores más importantes en el proceso educativo. Sin embargo, poco se sabe todavía cómo los profesores y sus estudiantes entienden este fenómeno y su necesidad. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de este estudio es analizar las percepciones de los profesores y estudiantes de la divulgación del profesor en el proceso educativo. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se ha utilizado el método de grupo focal. Catorce estudiantes (7 mujeres y 7 hombres) y 11 profesores (7 mujeres y 4 hombres) han participado en el estudio. Los resultados del estudio han demostrado que tanto los maestros como los estudiantes perciben a los maestros que se auto-revelan como el proceso de intercambio de conocimientos y la experiencia personal que debe ser adecuada, no demasiado a menudo y en su mayoría positivas.

Palabras clave: auto-revelación, relación profesor-alumno, grupos de enfoque

Abstract

Teacher's self-disclosure is one of the most important factors in the educational process. However, little is known about how teachers and their students understand this phenomenon. Thus, the aim of this study is to analyse teachers' and students' perceptions of teacher's disclosure in the educational process. In order to reach this goal, a focus group method was used. Fourteen students (7 female and 7 male) and 11 teachers (7 female and 4 male) participated in the study. The results of the study evidenced that: both teachers and students perceive teacher's self-disclosure as the process of sharing knowledge and personal experience; teacher's disclosure has to be relevant, not too often and mostly positive.

Keywords: self-disclosure, teacher-student relation, focus group

Introduction

Most of the time, students spend while interacting with their teachers, teacher-student relationship becomes an essential factor in the educational process (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Richmond, 1990). Thus, the way teachers communicate with their students must correspond to students' needs, to increase their involvement in the process of learning.

Researchers state that the immediacy (the behaviour which brings the teacher and students closer together) is a very important factor (Christopel, 1990; Richmond 1990; Velez & Cano, 2008). However, other researchers (e.g., Cayanus, Martin & Goodboy, 2009; Cayanus & Martin, 2008) point out that self-disclosure can also be a meaningful factor, affecting the educational process. By adopting this, Goldstein and Benassi (1997) have found that self-disclosure may help teachers to reach their educational goals as students increase their awareness of their teacher's personal and professional life.

According to Rasmussen and Mishna (2008), self-disclosure in educational settings gets too little attention from today's researchers. Consequently, it is important to conduct a qualitative study (in this case - with focus groups) in order to get a better understanding of the teacher's self-disclosure in the process of learning and teaching. Besides, the majority of the researchers focus only on the students' perceptions of teacher's self-disclosure while disregarding teachers' opinions. Thus, this study is focused on both teachers' and students' perspectives, and what would help to better understand teacher's self-disclosure in the educational process (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Reed & Payton, 1997).

Teacher's self-disclosure

The phenomenon of self-disclosure has received a lot of attention from researchers over recent decades. Mostly self-disclosure is analyzed in the area of relationships or communication (e.g., Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Greene, Derlega & Mathews, 2006), leaving the educational settings to one side. It means that disclosure in educational settings is still little studied even though it also plays an important role in the educational process (Zhang, Shi, Tolenson & Robinson, 2009).

Teacher's self-disclosure may be defined as a verbal communication with students (Cayanus & Martin, 2008) when teacher shares his or her personal and professional information (Goldstain & Benassi, 1994). It is important to state that the teacher's disclosure is a dynamic process, since the teacher has to make a decision regarding whether to disclose or to keep his/her anonymity (Greene, Derlega & Methews, 2006). In the other words, the teacher has to decide when his or her disclosure will be useful and needed (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). It is said that the teacher's self-disclosure usually occurs during the evaluation of teaching/learning program while presenting or explaining it to the class (Zhang et al., 2009). Moreover, it is said that the teacher's decision to disclose or not during the lessons is equal to the decision of introducing or including oneself in the teaching/learning program (James, 2009). Thus, Zhang, Shi, Tolenson and Robinson (2009) state that the teacher's disclosure in the educational process is like an informal aspect of the lesson which is related to physical, social and intellectual conditions.

According to Goldstain and Benassi (1994), the teacher's self-disclosure may occur during classroom discussions, while explaining the content or the material of the class topic or by classroom discussions. It means that before disclosing to the class, the teacher has to think if his or her disclosure is appropriate for the class (Zhang et al., 2009). Moreover, the teacher should

consider students' gender, age and their academic performance (Zhang et al., 2009), classroom norms (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994) and atmosphere because these factors moderates the process of teacher's disclosure. On this basis we may predict that it's a very complex and intensive process when the teacher has to decide whether his or her disclosure is relevant or appropriate to the class.

Self-disclosure in the educational process

Not surprisingly, at school students spend a lot of time interacting with their teachers (Hardre, Davis & Sullivan, 2008; Punyanunt-Carter, 2006; Richmond, 1990). As it was already mentioned, researchers (e.g., Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp & McHatton, 2008; Spilt & Oort, 2011) state that teacher-student relations or interactions are very important factors in educational process. According to Schrodt (2013), there is no better way to motivate students to learn than using self-disclosure during the lessons because it is a perfect tool to attract students attention.

Researchers note that teacher's self-disclosure is a part of verbal immediacy (Christophel, 1990; Richmond 1990; Velez & Cano, 2008; Walker, 2011). However, disclosure can be a useful tool in the educational process (Farani & Fatemi, 2014) especially if it is correctly and professionally used (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006) or if it helps students to learn (Punyanunt-Carter, 2006). Moreover, according to McBride and Wahl (2005), teacher's disclosure may be used to attract students' attention, to create a trusted classroom atmosphere and to inspire a student to be an active participant.

It is possible to distinguish three dimensions of the teacher's disclosure: relevance, frequency and negativity. In general, teachers use self-disclosure to convey the content of the given material (Cayanus, 2004) because it makes the content more understandable for the students (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). Such kind of disclosure complements the relevance of the teacher's self-disclosure (Cayanus, 2004). Lannutti and Strauman (2006) note that disclosure is inappropriate in the educational process, if it is not related to the content of the lesson. Hill, Yu and Lindsey (2008) also state that the teacher should not share information about his/her family problems, leisure activities or negative attitudes to the society or school and its structure. In this case, self-disclosure is irrelevant and may be related to the negativity of self-disclosure which may have a negative impact on the students in the process of learning and teaching (Cayanus, 2004; Hill, et al., 2008). The frequency of disclosure describes how often teachers disclose to their students. According to Cayanus and Martin (2008), the more teachers self-disclose through the content of the lesson, the more students will be involved in the learning of the specific subject. However, Eckhart (2011) states that it is also very important not to use self-disclosure too often as it may be rejected by the students.

The research of Zhang et al. (2009) has shown that, according to teachers' opinions, the teacher's disclosure may be used as a technique to motivate students, to attract their attention and to develop teacher-student relations. Cayanus, et al. (2009) also note that the educator's self-disclosure is like a tool which promotes students' motivation to learn and to participate in different exercises during the lessons. This indicates that the teacher's disclosure is a very important part in the educational process and its main function is to create and maintain relationships between educators and their students (Cayanus, et al.., 2009; Walker, 2011; Zhang et al., 2009). However, it is still unclear what do teachers and students think about the teacher's self-disclosure as a phenomenon in itself. Thus, the aim of this research is to find out what do teachers' and students' think about the teacher's disclosure in the educational process.

It's obvious that the teacher's disclosure has some advantages and disadvantages (Cayanus, 2004; Eckhart, 2011; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). First of all, that disclosure helps in creating a positive classroom atmosphere (Cayanus, 2004; Cayanus & Martin, 2008; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). The sharing of personal information creates or may help to establish an informal environment in the classroom (Allen & Court, 2009; Antaki, 2005). Furthermore, self-disclosure is useful in creating and maintaining interpersonal teacher-student relationships which are based on respect and trust (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). Antaki and colleagues (2005) also state that teacher's disclosure helps to create supportive classroom climate. It's important to note that self-disclosure has to help students to better understand the content of the lesson (Eckhart, 2011; Tucker, 2012; Simpson, 2009).

Downs, Javidi and Nussbaum (1988) state that the main goal of using teacher's disclosure should be the willingness to help students to better understand the material of the subject. Goldstain and Benassi (1994) in their research have found that students' perceptions of teacher's self-disclosure are significantly related to students' activity during the lessons. However, according to Zhang and colleagues (2009), it's inappropriate to disclose too personal or intimate information to the class even though it may help to create closer relationships with students. In general, the teacher wants to be liked by the students, thus, he or she may disclose about his/her personal life or emerging family problems. However, students may reject such kinds of disclosure and this may lead to poor teacher-student relationships. Thus, it is said that the teacher's self-disclosure is a very good tool which can and has to be used in the educational process (Tucker, 2012).

As mentioned above, the phenomena of teacher disclosure has been studied in a variety of methods. However, as the literature review has shown, the operationalization of teacher's self-disclosure and its aspects are still unclear and it needs to be explored more deeply from both teachers' and students' perspectives (Gayle, Preiss, Burrell & Allen, 2006). Thus, we have conducted focus groups of teachers and students in order to generate a better understanding of this potentially effective educational tool.

Methods

Procedure

The purposive sampling technique has been chosen for the selection of the participants. The research was conducted in two different kinds of schools – urban and rural schools. It was planned to conduct four focus groups: two groups of 8 students, where the key considerations for selection were the grade (10th and 11th), academic achievements (high and low) and students' gender (female and male); two groups of 8 teachers, where the considerations for selection were the teacher's gender (female or male) and educational subject (humanitarian sciences, nature sciences, formal sciences and mathematics, arts, sports or ethics and psychology). However, only 14 students (7 students in each group) and 11 teachers (7 teachers in one group and 4 – in a second one) agreed to participate in the discussion.

At the beginning of the organized focus group the participants were informed about the main goal of the research and the procedure of the research. It was also explained how the participants had been selected, what was the expected length of the group discussion. They were also informed that the discussion would be recorded and protocoled by the mentor of the discussion. The research was carried out in Lithuanian.

The results of the focus groups have been analyzed using content analysis. In this analysis, the answers of the participants have been grouped into subcategories and categories.

Focus groups. In order to find out teachers' and students' views on teacher's disclosure, a qualitative method of focus groups has been used in this study. Focus group, as a method, is based on the discussion on the particular theme (Reed & Payton, 1997). We have chosen to conduct focus groups because it is said that such a kind of method helps to gain a better knowledge of the analyzed phenomena (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Reed & Payton, 1997). We have created the questions for the focus group according to the references of the teacher's self-disclosure.

Questions for the teachers' focus group:
- What is teacher's self-disclosure?
- How do you generally self-disclose yourself to the students?
- How often do you self-disclose? On what does it depend?
- When is a teacher's disclosure to the students relevant?
- When is a teacher's disclosure to the students irrelevant?

Questions for students' focus group:
- How would you define teacher's self-disclosure?
- How does the teacher reveal self-disclosure during the lessons?
- When is a teacher's self-disclosure relevant for you? Give some examples.
- How often do teachers self-disclose during the lessons? Give some examples.
- What do you think about irrelevant teacher disclosure? Give some examples.

Demographic questions. The participants also had to answer some demographic questions about their gender, age. Teachers were asked some additional questions about their qualifications and the subjects they teach. Students were also asked about their academic achievements.

Participants

Fourteen students (7 female and 7 male) from the 10th and 11th grades participated in the study. The age of students varied from 15 to 17 years with a mean of 15.14 years. The mean of their academic achievements is 7.5 points.

Eleven teachers agreed to take part in the focus group. Seven of them were female and 4 – male. The age of teachers varied from 27 to 54 years with a mean of 41.18 years. Four of the participants teach natural sciences or mathematics, 1 teaches arts, 2 teach humanitarian sciences, and 4 teach ethics, psychology or sports.

Results

In the following we present the results of teachers' and students' opinions regarding the focus group's questions. The results are presented by giving the examples of teachers' and students' opinions on the focus group's questions.

What is teacher self-disclosure?

Teachers' opinion

The results of teachers' answers have been grouped into 3 categories:

Knowledge and personal experience. This category covers the subcategories of sharing knowledge, sharing personal experience, sharing real life experience. The majority of the teachers (n=7) think that first of all teacher's disclosure occurs by sharing personal experience with students:

"Sometimes I give them examples from my own work, leisure activities, some kind of life downfalls or upswings (female history teacher)" or "I express myself through my personal example (female religion teacher)."

Interestingly, according to the teachers, this sharing doesn't always have to be related to the content of the lesson:

"<…> while sharing personal information you disclose yourself as a human being (female history teacher)."

Teacher-student relation. During the discussion teachers also found that their disclosure is closely related to their interactions with students. Teachers (n=6) think that self-disclosure to the class promotes collaboration and helps to create friendly relations:

"It's like a honest communication <...> you can feel when you talk in warm or formal way. That warm communication can be self-disclosure (male math's teacher)" or "It's not only the subject you teach what matters <…> collaboration with students is also important (female ethic's teacher)."

Boundaries. Teachers (n=4) state that self-disclosure can't be used freely – there are some boundaries when, for instance, the teacher shouldn't talk to the class about their family problems:

"There has to be a boundary <...> you can't become a friend of a student <...> you can't share personal family problems (female Lithuanian teacher)" or "You can't tell everything about yourself (female history teacher)."

Students' opinion

Students, similar to the teachers, think that the teacher's self-disclosure can be described through 3 categories:

Sharing personal experience (subcategories: stories about oneself, sharing experiences). According to students (n=5), the teacher's self-disclosure is like a story or narratives of his/her life experience:

"They give us their own experience, for example, what's the easier way of solving the exercise (female student)" or "Gives us examples of his own life experience (male student)."

Sharing personal information (subcategories: showing personal traits, exploring personal life). Students (n=4) think that educators' disclosure is also related to the teachers' personal traits:

"It's teacher's disclosure of his/her personality <...> how he communicates with students and his colleagues (female student)" or "It's his/her behaviour and attitudes (female student)."

Teaching style (demonstration of teaching style). It is interesting that students (n=2), as opposed to the teachers, see the teacher's disclosure as a way of expressing teaching style:

"When he tells us who he really is in life and how he teaches us (female student)" or "Maybe they also discloses through the teaching style <…> by telling us what to do in the class (male student). "

How teachers self-disclose?

Teachers' opinion

The results of teachers' answers have been grouped into 3 categories:

Integrating teachers' views and values in to the content of the subject (subcategories: integrating teacher's opinion and values through the literature, relating the subject with life tasks). Some of the teachers (n=2) said that generally they disclose themselves while explaining the content of the particular subject sharing their opinion or values:

"Sometimes students ask why do I need math <...> then I start to tell that math is good in training your mind, analytic-logic thinking. It helps in the whole life (male math's teacher)" or "I always give my personal opinion about any book students have to read (female Lithuanian teacher)."

Activities during the lesson (subcategories: helping to choose the way of learning, playing games, demonstrations). It is interesting, that, according to teachers (n=4), the chosen activities used to make the content of the lesson more understandable to students also requires their self-disclosure:

"I show students how to do the exercises (male sport's teacher)" or "Sometimes in a sudden you think of a game and play it with kids by expressing yourself (female ethic's teacher)."

Demonstrating personal traits (subcategories: mesmerism, humanity). The majority of the teachers (n=5) think that such kind of disclosure isn't direct but it is very important because non-verbal communication occurs more often than a verbal one:

"Sometimes you just have to show to students that you ARE (male ethic's teacher)" or "Firstly, the teacher has to act as a human showing his positive attitudes (female biology teacher)."

Students' opinion

The results of students' opinion may be grouped into 3 categories:

The organization of the educational process (subcategories: teaching and evaluation strategies, classroom management, and humanness). Interestingly, students (n=5) think that the educator's disclosure is related to the evaluation system and the way they manage the class:

"For example, if the class is very loud <...> one teacher can just ask a student to leave the classroom while the other may get angry on the whole class (female student)" or "Every teacher has his/her personal teaching style (female student)."

Showing personal experience (subcategories: positive and negative academic experience, life experience). Interestingly, students (n=5) note that teachers are used to disclose their personal life through negative and/or positive academic experience:

"About smoking <...> he says he tried to smoke the first time <...> it was a break and the director came then he (the teacher) put the cigarette in to his pocket and it started to burn <...> (male student)" or "Telling stories about their experience at school (female student)."

It's important to note that expressing one's negative experience, especially in the academic area, is an irrelevant and inappropriate way to self-disclose (Cayanus, 2004; Ejsing, 2007).

Use of humor. Using humour during the lessons is another way for the teachers to self-disclose (n=2):

"Teacher tells a lot about himself while joking (female student)."

However, the teacher has to be thoughtful and use jokes or humour in appropriate way (Cayanus, 2004) – he or she has to make sure, that every student in the class will understand the joke.

Frequency (amount), relevance and negativity of teacher's disclosure

Frequency (amount). According to teachers (n=4), they use disclosure very often in their classes, because self-disclosure is not always verbal – it is also non-verbal and occurs all the time:

"<…> you have to be always ready to self-disclose (female biology teacher)" or "as students are able to observe us all the time, it means that we are also disclosing all the time (female Lithuanian teacher)."

However, students (n=4) say that teachers use self-disclosure very rarely because it depends on the teacher's personality, the subject he or she teaches and the time teaching his/her subject:

"It depends on the teacher. Some of them disclose themselves very often and some of them don't do that at all (male student)" or "If the teacher just started working, he tries to disclose more (female student)."

Despite this, both teachers and students state that teacher disclosure has boundaries. For example:

"It's not bad when teacher tells stories about himself/herself, but when it's too much, well, you have to teach also not just talk about your personal life. It's also not good when students know a lot about teacher (male student)" or "<…> it's not good to bring family problems to the class (female Lithuanian teacher)."

Relevance and negativity. According to the majority of teachers (n=5), the relevance of disclosure depends on the whole school, its system, emotional atmosphere and educators' skills. When a teacher isn't in a good mood, self-disclosure is irrelevant or negative:

"When someone from the administration on the break tells you something and you have to come back to the class while not feeling well (male math's teacher)."

They also note that it's irrelevant to talk to students about their family or other personal problems (n=8):

"You can't get undress as much as it would be funny<…> you can't get into the very intimate personal aspects (female history teacher)" or "It's bad when you can't control your feelings or emotions in the class (male math's teacher)."

Students (n=9) think that relevant teacher's disclosure helps them to have a better orientation in the educational process and better understand the content of the subject. They also note that it is useful in developing relations with teacher:

"For example, the teacher is sick <…> then the other teacher comes and you even don't know him/her <…> then you sit silently and feel afraid to say a word (female student)" or "When a teacher gives us an example from his/her own life <…> we can better understand the subject (female student)."

Moreover, it is essential to mention that, according to the teachers, teacher's self-disclosure can't be relevant if the teacher doesn't have needed material for the lesson and if the students aren't likely to accept teacher's disclosure. Students (n=7) also distinguished few aspects, describing negative teacher's disclosure. They state that too frequent, not related to the lesson's content and containing negative emotions disclosure is irrelevant or negative to the class. For example:

"It's not good when a teacher tells that what's not related to the lesson. They just keep telling stories (male student)."

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of organized focus groups has shown that both teachers and students perceive teacher's self-disclosure and its main factors alike. For example, according to the teachers' views, teacher's self-disclosure is the process of sharing knowledge and personal experience. According to the students' views, teacher's disclosure is similar to personal stories, when teachers talk about themselves and their own experiences. These definitions are similar to the one suggested by Goldstain and Benassi (1994) – it's a process of sharing personal and professional information. It's important to mention that, according to teachers, there is a need to pay attention to the boundaries of self-disclosure. James (2009) states that in the ideal case the teacher should always consider all possible variants of disclosure and evaluate its relevance. In other words, the teacher has to decide whether his/her disclosure is relevant and needed in a concrete situation. Thus, teacher has to make a decision – to disclose or not to disclose (Eckhart, 2011; Goldstain & Benassi, 1994).

Both teachers and students believe that in general teachers disclose while explaining the content of the given subject's material, explaining exercises or organizing their work. Moreover, both groups also agree that disclosing particularly personal information or family related problems is an irrelevant and negative way to disclose to the class. With reference to Cayanus and Martin (2008), irrelevant teacher's disclosure goes along with the negativity of self-disclosure, because the main goal of teacher's disclosure is to inforce students' interest in the particular subject and to help them better understand the content of the subject (Goldstain & Benassi, 1994).

Hill and colleagues (2008) state that the teacher's disclosure may be used as a tool which determines better teacher-student relationships, promotes students' interest in the subject's material and stimulates participation in the classroom activities. Furthermore, according to teachers, disclosure may provoke students to act as the particular teacher does (e.g., engage in sports as the teacher does). Thus, we may conclude that, according to both teachers and students, if teacher's disclosure is relevant, not too often and positive – it is needed and appropriate in the educational process (Cayanus, 2004; Ejsing, 2007; Hill et al., 2008); however, if it's too personal, too frequent and it is related with negative experience - it is inappropriate.

This research has shown that the method of the focus groups is a very useful tool which helps to better understand the material of the subject. In this study we have organized 4 focus groups (2 with teachers and 2 with students). However, in order to have a wider understanding of teacher's disclosure in the educational process, it would be meaningful to organize deeper research, combining focus groups from a different age groups, schools and gender. Moreover, the subject the teacher is teaching may also be an important factor in understanding the teacher's self-disclosure. Thus, it would also be needed to include this factor in the further research.

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