

Organizational communication between teachers and managers: comparative analysis of Colombian institutions

Comunicación organizacional entre maestros y gerentes: análisis comparativo en las instituciones colombianas

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to determine the relevant factors of communication problems in two official schools in Colombia. The sample consisted of 58 teachers, who completed a 9-question survey. The data analysis describes the internal communication factors and then develops the comparative analysis using the U-Mann Whitney test. Despite sharing similar characteristics of official schools according to the Ministry of National Education, it is revealed that both institutions have significant differences in their internal organizational communication.

key words: internal organizational communication, educational institutions, official schools, comparative analysis.

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación es determinar los factores relevantes de los problemas comunicacionales en dos escuelas oficiales de Colombia. La muestra fue de 58 profesores, a quienes se aplicó una encuesta de 9 preguntas. El análisis de datos describe los factores de comunicación interna y luego desarrolla el estudio comparativo utilizando la prueba de U-Mann Whitney. Aunque ambas instituciones oficiales comparten características similares según el Ministerio de Educación Nacional, presentan diferencias significativas en su comunicación organizacional interna.

Palabras clave: comunicación organizacional interna, instituciones educativas, escuelas públicas, análisis comparativo.

1. Introduction

Organizational communication refers to a series of processes that imply transmission of messages between members of an institution, therefore, allowing their interaction. (Martín & García, 2013). For its part, strategic

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communication involves management activities developed within any type of organization to guarantee sustainability of the internal processes, as well as to offer manifold services to society. Hence, the strategic communication permeates not only different organizational departments but also educational institutions as the latter are organizations that fulfil a strategic role both inside and outside their premises (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Heide, von Platen, Simonsson & Falkheimer, 2018).

From a strategic point of view, management activities allow distinguishing both external and internal organizational aspects. Among the internal aspects that should be strategically examined within institutions is the organizational communication (Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič & Zeffass, 2018). This research seeks to conduct two case studies and verify the communication process that occurs within the state educational institutions in Colombia. The Ministry of National Education MEN (Mineducación a, n.d.) determines the education-related policies and, therefore, guarantees the optimal functioning of each state institution. Currently, the country orients its actions towards the educational quality and thus the MEN establishes the high-quality standards for each type of the public institutions. From this perspective, the strategies that target educational quality aim at strengthening official institutions so that they can have optimal learning scenarios and thus promote skills development, as well as peaceful coexistence among teachers, students, and administrative personnel (Portocarrero, 2018).

Furthermore, the institutional quality depends on internal communication processes that facilitate the performance of employees' activities. Such communication processes are developed on highly satisfactory organizational relationships. Accordingly, educational institutions require strategic communication as regards academic planning to optimize a proper comprehension of the instructions provided to teachers by directors (downward communication). In this sense, the quality of teaching and learning processes, as well as the other administrative activities are guaranteed. Nevertheless, the elementary educational institutions currently display certain communication disfunctions at an organizational level (Montoya, León & Rodríguez, 2019). Such is the case studied through this investigation that scrutinizes the communication aspects within the official schools in Colombia.

Considering the issues mentioned above, the aim of the present paper is to compare the fundamental types of internal organizational communication (IOC) within the two elementary schools in Colombia that share similar characteristics according to their classification by the MEN; however, both institutions are situated in different geographical areas. This study involves the IOC aspects, the core tenets of the educational management, as well as the comparative method elements (Sartori, 1994). The current manuscript contains the introduction part, literature review, theoretical framework, materials and method, results, discussion section, and conclusion.

1.1. Complexity and quality of internal organizational communication

The lack of awareness regarding the process of internal organizational communication (IOC) with all its actors becomes a serious matter that imperils organizational sustainability. The complexity of communication refers, among other aspects, to the performance of diverse employees at distinct levels of hierarchy, as well as different job performance functions (Tsoukas, 2017). Likewise, IOC becomes a crucial strategy to keep workers satisfied in their workplace (Ruck & Welch, 2012).

From the contributions made by Hernández, Parra, García, Beleño, Romero & Duran (2017), it can be understood that the form of communication between people determines their level of relationship and thus influences the success that employees can have in their workplace. This does not escape the educational setting, where teachers must establish good relationships through assertive communication that reveals their behavior with good citizenship practices, which leads to harmonious environment.

The quality of communication influences the quality of employee performance at different organizational levels (Yuelan & Jing, 2018). Such an influence occurs due to the following fundamental factors: on the one hand, leadership communication and, on the other hand, the communication strategies oriented to good employee relations. Hence, the organizational behavior must be directed by communication strategies that contribute to creating a better work environment, thereby guaranteeing the highest performance of workers (Hernández, Parra, García, Beleño, Romero & Duran, 2017). Moreover, the communication process complexity implicitly leads to the interaction of two or more people, groups of people, or work teams that can be interdisciplinary and belong to different departments and areas within the same organization. All this gives the internal communication a relational character, which entails all the social structures in an institution (Ololube, 2012).

García, Fulquez, Vazquez, Alguacil & Hilares (2020) explain that work-related stress is influenced by educational policies and, consequently, may negatively affect high school teachers. To tackle the issue of stress, the authors recommend improving communication with teachers, through practices that offer adequate instruction, so that they understand the mechanisms for adapting to institutional changes derived from educational policies.

1.2. The strategic role of internal organizational communication

Organizational communication within companies becomes a predictor of governing body leadership actions, which affect each employee's behavior, as well as the work teams in general (Butt et al., 2018). Consequently, the strategic management should lead to the development of adequately contextualized communication within an organization. In this manner, internal communication should be viewed as a complex process with a wide background, core elements within the organizational culture, leadership style, and knowledge management. The aspects mentioned generate an internal communication impact on employee satisfaction, both cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally, thereby achieving high employee loyalty and commitment, as well as optimal performance at work (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012; Karanges, 2014).

Communication becomes a strategic key to ensure that companies can function effectively. People in managerial positions must know how to exert leadership based on fluid and permanent communication. Likewise, directors must employ their best communication leadership tools to promote full compliance with daily activities, focusing on organizational objectives and goals. For this reason, it is assumed that approximately 70 to 90 percent of working time should be dedicated to effective strategic communication within an organization (Barrett, 2006).

The organization success emanates mainly from its proper communication process, which is supported by good communication channels, adequate information shared between managers and staff, as well as strategic actions that allow face-to-face interaction among people when complex issues require making strategic decisions (Naylor, 1999). Organizational communication should not be considered as a linear process for the message transmission. Consequently, a feedback culture must be implemented thus ensuring the message transmission comprehension and involving the actions derived from the communicative process (Narula, 2006; Pazmay, Pardo & Ortiz, 2017).

On those grounds, it is evident that good communication is essential for a suitable coordination of activities (Álvarez, 2013; De Castro, 2014). In the same vein, it is recommended that people who perform an academic role expand their interdisciplinary worldview aimed at promoting strategic communication and establishing a continual improvement process (Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič & Zerfass, 2018).

1.3. The effectiveness of internal organizational communication

The best way to guarantee effective communication among company members is to uphold internal formal communication, which is subdivided into downward, horizontal and upward. These types of communication circulate through face-to-face meetings and virtual media, with the intention of integrating and engaging workers

to empower them with actions aimed at organizational objectives. In this sense, the meaning of downward communication refers to a type of communication that descends from managers to workers. Albeit the most effective type, downward communication assumes a high risk because the slightest error of the message addressed from superiors to subordinates can cause a failure in the entire organizational process thus reaching its break (Trelles, 2011). Some scholars indicate that downward communication tends to be more efficient when the messages are strictly related to the accomplishment of precise and clear tasks and, consequently, this type of communication is more fluid. (Pazmay, Pardo & Ortiz, 2017).

Another type of internal communication is denominated horizontal, which is established between people at the same organizational level. Horizontal communication allows rapid and coordinated fulfillment of tasks as it focuses on specific issues within an area.

Notwithstanding, within the internal formal communication, there is also the ascending type when the messages are transmitted from the workers to the managerial levels. This type is denominated upward communication that occurs when workers need to ask questions, make requests, solve problems, or express some special concerns (Trelles, 2011; Sanchis & Bonavia, 2017).

Managers must create an optimal working environment within an organization and have tools that allow them to observe and evaluate their workers' satisfaction, which depends largely on the forms of communication established (Castro, 2010; Martín & García, 2013). Therefore, the management staff must identify the characteristics of their interlocutors and the context, in which the communicative process flows, with the respective theoretical and practical components of strategic communication (Segredo, García, López, León & Perdomo, 2017).

Within some organizations, a single type of communication may prevail, while in others, the three types of communication mentioned above can be found in a rather differentiated manner. It is crucial that directors identify these forms of communication and, likewise, assertively develop a plan for continuous organizational improvement (Chamba-Rueda, Higuerey, Pardo-Cueva, & Rios-Zaruma, 2018). When weaknesses and drawbacks of the communication are recognized, improvement strategies can be developed through feedback (Vallejo & Pardo, 2009). These communication strategies allow to increase the productivity levels of the personnel, pointing to the success of an organization (Hargie, 2016).

It is essential to highlight the importance that underlies the internal strategic communication channels, since they must allow an active participation of all the members and interest groups within the organization. These communicative channels are designed to favor interaction at all hierarchical levels (Goldhaber, 1984).

Moreover, internal communication also contributes to confronting critical situations and improving an organizational image among workers. In addition, the internal formal communication enables employees to consolidate knowledge about an institution and strengthen an organizational culture, at the same time it encourages innovation and ensures the production process quality (Álvarez, 2007). The effectiveness of a well-structured strategic communication leads to freedom of expression and promotes the right to accessing information among all members of an organization (Charry, 2018).

1.4. Internal communication conflicts and the importance of active listening

In all types of organizations (commerce, health, education, services, etc.), the form of internal communication determines the success of all processes. Hence, organizational conflicts generated by inappropriate communicative forms must be considered. For instance, certain difficulties are observed within vertical communication when directors use a management style and leadership that is not understandable for workers, causing inefficient downward communication (Hernández, Gallarzo & Espinoza, 2011). Another concern for

inappropriate downward communication is when employees cannot fulfill organizational goals and objectives as they misunderstand the mandate received; therefore, their work performance is affected. On the other hand, upward vertical communication reveals some conflicts, when workers cannot convey their true needs and requirements to directors due to the transmitted information distortion. This distorted communication is a consequence of intending to satisfy and please certain employees within an organization. Regarding horizontal communication, interpersonal differences or competitive issues frequently trigger manifold conflicts among coworkers (Hernández, Gallarzo & Espinoza, 2011).

In the organizational communication process, listening is of paramount importance, therefore, the receiver must carefully and adequately focus the attention on the sender's message. In strategic communication, listening is an indispensable condition due to its meaning that refers to the ability to pay active attention to the message being transmitted, in order to analyze, store and draw conclusions from a certain message (Kelly, 1975). Nevertheless, workers can receive information, either from their directors (downward communication), or from a partner at the same organizational level (horizontal communication); similarly, an employee at a managerial position can receive a message from a subordinate (upward communication). In any of the cases, a person who receives a message must guarantee an active listening that provides an adequate and efficient communication process (Macnamara, 2014, 2017; Claro, 2019).

When organizations guarantee an open feedback process, appropriate decisions can be made and the types of communication (downward, horizontal, and upward) can be developed efficiently and thus foster favorable human relations within institutions (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Claro, 2019). The communication process must strongly lead to attainment of the work team cohesion, especially it must be oriented towards common goals according to the requirements of each department within an organization (Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2018). In this sense, communicational leadership must be considered at all organizational levels.

One way to contribute assertively to the rapid and efficient development of organizations is to adapt the organizational structure to the business environment needs and to ensure the sustainability over time. One of the management strategies is the development of internal communication, which supports the creation of high-efficiency work teams, considering the integration of all departments, and thereby achieving cost reduction and mitigating the communication errors (Anderson et al., 2018).

1.5. Internal communication within an educational setting in Colombia

In the light of the aforementioned, internal organizational communication (IOC) contributes to good relations between employees within the same organization. By the same token, IOC is essential in the educational context, and thereby guarantees that the teaching-learning process as well as the development and improvement plans reach institutional objectives (Werder, Nothhaft, Verčič & Zerfass, 2018). In Colombia, the educational management body allows the operation of official schools and thereby considers the organizational aspects that guarantee teachers' successful performance as well as the internal communication processes. The idea is to contribute to the teaching team welfare, so that teachers can perform their functions in the best possible manner regarding the teaching-learning process. Nowadays, there is a great concern about the IOC difficulties expressed by the state teachers as they perceive that their complaints, suggestions or recommendations are not heard by directors in a reasonable amount of time. Besides, the school employees express their discontent with respect to labor disputes between coworkers at the same hierarchical level (discussions, disagreements and low collaborative level). Internal communication difficulties hamper the processes within educational institutions and hinder the educational quality fulfillment.

2. Methodology

This study is descriptive, transactional with non-experimental design. Moreover, it is a comparative study which analyzes internal organizational communication (IOC) aspects between teachers and directors within two elementary state schools in Colombia. Both educational institutions contain the same characteristics regarding their organizational structure, functions, facilities as well as the number of students, teachers and management personnel according to the Ministry of Education (MEN) requirements.

2.1. Participants

For the present study, the two cases of the educational institutions were considered. Both institutions are located in different places around the country. In each institution, non-probability sampling was used for collecting survey data, and each director gave a specific permission for the teachers to participate in the research. Finally, the sample included 29 full-time teachers for each state school in Colombia (in total, 58 respondents).

2.2. Data collection

The questionnaire denominated Organizational Communication in Educational Institutions (OCEI) was designed to examine the IOC fundamental aspects regarding teachers and their respective directors in the state educational institutions in Colombia. The three aspects (variables) of the organizational communication were downward, horizontal, and upward (Shonubi & Akintaro, 2016). For each aspect, different questions were designed (see Table 1). The original questionnaire was developed in the mother tongue and then translated into the target language by authors.

2.3. Data analysis - Phase A: the case description

The preliminary section contained each case description: educational institution 1 and educational institution 2 (E1a – E1b). The data collection tool was administered to the teachers in each institution. Afterwards, the descriptive statistics was developed by means of the collected data. Therefore, the organizational communication description (downward, horizontal, and upward) was possible to obtain for both institutions.

2.4. Data analysis - Phase B: comparative analysis

In this study, the Anderson-Darling test was used to verify whether the data collected from the two institutions had a normal behavior in relation to the following communication variables - downward, horizontal, and upward (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). Thereafter, the asymmetry and kurtosis parameters were analyzed (see Table 5). Next, a comparative method between E1a and E1b was applied using U Mann Whitney test which was aimed at validating either of the hypotheses, H_0 or H_1 , between the two means. The hypothesis system was established for each organizational communication variable in order to convey the comparative analysis of the three aspects in both schools:

Downward communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Downward communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is a significant difference between the two institutions.

Horizontal communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Horizontal communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is a significant difference between the two institutions.

Upward communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Upward communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is a significant difference between the two institutions.

3. Results

The normality test was performed using the Anderson-Darling statistic, for the following variables: downward communication (DC), horizontal communication (HC), and upward communication (UC). This can be observed in Tables 2, 3 and 4. As a result, it was possible to verify whether the test data for both schools within two separate geographical areas had a normal distribution.

The results of the parameters in the Anderson-Darling statistical test presented a high value for all the data. This value means that there is no normal distribution. It is evident that, in all cases, the p-value is less than or equal to the level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$. In addition, to confirm the non-normality of the data, other asymmetry and kurtosis statistics were calculated (see Table 5). In this case it was possible to determine the non-normality of the data, since both parameters did not meet the condition of being within ± 0.5 . When the two values (asymmetry and kurtosis) are outside the range of ± 0.5 , the sample has a different distribution rather than normal. For this reason, the test denominated Mann-Whitney U was performed. By means of this test, the hypotheses were contrasted to verify whether the communication variables (downward, horizontal, and upward) were different in each school. Therefore, it was possible to confirm whether or not there were statistically significant differences between the means in both groups, considering the established level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$.

3.1. U-Mann Whitney test

This method identifies the difference or similarity between two populations, and it is recommended to apply when the data do not have a normal distribution. To this end, the samples compared must be completely independent and unrelated. Proceeding with the comparative analysis, the two hypotheses to be tested are considered. The first hypothesis states that the means are equal (H_0), while the second one affirms that they are different (H_1). With H_0 , it is assumed that there are no significant differences between the two population samples, whereas H_1 presumes that there are significant differences between the same samples. The above described can be identified by comparing the p-value, which results from the analysis. In this sense, when the p-value is greater than 0.05, it is verified that the first hypothesis (H_0) is the true one. In the opposite case, the second hypothesis (H_1) would be valid (Penella, 2013).

3.2. U-Mann Whitney test analysis

Downward communication

Downward communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Downward communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is a significant difference between the two institutions. According to Table 6, two p-values greater than $\alpha = 0.050$ (95% confidence level) corresponding to questions one and three from the OCEI questionnaire can be verified. These values indicate that the null hypothesis (H_0) is valid, which confirms the similarity of both samples.

On the other hand, only in question two for downward communication, significant differences are detected at 5%, for the whole (DCE1a2-DCE1b2). In other words, the messages emitted by the managers to the workers

(downward communication) with the purpose of promoting the sense of belonging to the organization gave a result with significant difference between the two samples compared.

When evaluating the set (DCEIa2-DCEIb2), it was verified that the downward communication for the first school (E1a) was higher with respect to the second school (E1b). The difference in the downward communication variable (DC) between the two schools was 1,0000. The confidence interval was 95.2%. The p-value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). It concludes that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean of the DC variable. Accordingly, the alternative hypothesis H_1 is accepted, which means that there are differences between the school samples for question two in the OCEI questionnaire. This difference constitutes a finding for the research.

Horizontal communication

Horizontal communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Horizontal communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is significant difference between the two institutions (See Table 7).

When validating the hypotheses, significant differences are verified within the group (HCEIa1-HCEIb1; HCEIa3 - HCEIb3) because the p-value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, we can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean for the horizontal communication factor related to questions number 1 and 3. In this sense, we can assert:

The results of the comparative study on communication between employees at the same hierarchical level (HC) who seek to achieve common objectives, showed a significant difference between the two school samples. After each sample mean evaluation (E1a and E1b), a greater communicative interaction between E1a teachers was confirmed with respect to E1b teachers.

The comparative study on communication related to the welfare culture in both schools (E1a and E1b) also obtained a significant difference. The teachers from the first institution E1a had a greater domain or knowledge related to the preventive culture, compared to the teachers within the second school E1b.

Upward communication

Upward communication H_0 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are similar. There is no significant difference between the two institutions.

Upward communication H_1 : The two means (E1a and E1b) of the sample are not similar. There is significant difference between the two institutions (see Table 8).

The comparative results on the first and second upward communication (UC) questions, between the two samples (UCEIa1 - UCEIb1 and UCEIa2 - UCEIb2), determined that there were significant differences in the p-value ($p < 0.05$). In that respect, we could say:

The comparative study related to upward communication channels between the two schools showed that there were statistically significant differences between the two samples (UCEIa1 and UCEIb1). The mean analysis between both samples indicated that the first school (E1a) communication channels improved the interaction between teachers and institutional management, whereas the second institution (E1b) sample had a lower result than the first one (E1a).

The importance that institutional managers give to teachers, through upward communication, was evidenced in the comparative study between both schools. The result revealed another significant difference, when the sample mean of the second school (E1b) was greater than that of the other school (E1a). This implies that the

second school (Elb) directors give careful attention to the teachers' opinion, whereas the first school (Ela) managers do not have the same attitude.

On the other hand, the comparative results of the third question on upward communication (UC) showed a similarity between the two samples analyzed (UCEIa3 - UCEIb3).

3.3. Discussion

The comparative study has allowed us to confront the three types of internal communication, between the two samples of teachers who belong to the state educational institutions in Colombia. It is worth mentioning that both schools have the same operating characteristics, physical infrastructure, student capacity, as well as number of teachers and administrative staff. However, the analysis shows findings that differentiate these two institutions.

Initially, the similarities found from this study refer to the following aspects:

In downward communication (DC), both samples (Ela and Elb) are similar when directors provide guidance on organizational culture in general. Moreover, the two institutions are analogous, when workers receive timely response from their managers. Optimal downward communication, with clear and appropriate information, allows employees to comprehend directors' guidelines, so that a great number of workers can perform multiple tasks in a better and successful manner (Trelles, 2011; Pazmay, Pardo & Ortiz, 2017).

With regard to horizontal communication (HC), in both schools, teachers share information among them to solve common problems, in compliance with adequate communication and organizational relationship at the same hierarchical level (Trelles, 2011; Sanchis & Bonavia, 2017).

For upward communication (UC) in both educational institutions, teachers agree on raising and conveying their concerns to the administrative team; however, the messages transmitted do not arrive as expected. Such a situation hinders the effective execution of activities in general, due to the lack of active listening (Macnamara, 2014, 2017; Claro, 2019).

In addition to the above, the differences identified between the two institutions are featured below:

As far as the downward communication (DC) is concerned, the analysis compared between the two sample means revealed a finding with significant differences. To foster a sense of belonging to the institution, managers develop a more effective downward communication in Ela than within Elb. (Trelles, 2011; Pazmay et al., 2017).

The horizontal communication among teachers demonstrated that there was a greater interaction with successful results within Ela, in relation to Elb. It is emphasized that good communication between workers at the same hierarchical level contributes to achieving organizational objectives and goals (Trelles, 2011; Sanchis & Bonavia, 2017).

Regarding upward communication, the first school (Ela) communication channels strengthen the interaction between teachers and institutional management, whereas within Elb, this fact does not occur. It is of considerable importance for workers (teachers) to ensure the best communication channels and thus to convey their needs to directors (Trelles, 2011; Sanchis & Bonavia, 2017).

One of the significant findings is that in the second institution Elb, principals do indeed attach importance to their teachers and listen carefully to their messages, whereas in the first school Ela directors do not have the same communication behavior. An important aspect within the internal communication processes is that managers must be very attentive and employ active listening in order to receive properly the messages from

their employees and thus offer them the attention they deserve in a timely manner (Trelles, 2011; Sanchis & Bonavia, 2017).

In accordance with the findings revealed, it can be presumed that social, environmental, geographical, and cultural factors of different regions within the same country tend to condition the internal communication variables in state educational institutions. Therefore, we suggest conducting an additional study, which considers the cultural, social, and geographical variables.

4. Conclusions

The results of this research have made it possible to recognize the value of good organizational communication when contented people (teachers and administrative team) who are highly productive are required in schools. When communication differences are observed in educational entities, which are supposed to function equally throughout the country, then certain preventive and corrective measures must be taken in order to solve the problems. A nation establishes operating parameters for its public schools, which can be reflected in the infrastructure of the buildings, the number of students that they must serve, the number of teachers that they must have, as well as the administrative management staff, among other aspects.

In addition, each country establishes national laws and norms that guarantee the proper functioning of schools. However, when organizational communication presents difficulties, even when all schools have the same characteristics as those mentioned above, the problem of human relations becomes evident, and this should be addressed immediately. The above will education to maintain its quality standards.

For this reason, the current work has made it possible to recognize favorable aspects of internal communication within public schools in Colombia, which also serve as an example to other countries due to the impact that communication has on teacher performance.

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