**////Title: Improving Communication and Learning in South African Classrooms**

**////Standfirst:**

The broad dissemination of information online has made students more inclined to question what they are being taught in the classroom. Many educators are thus trying to adapt their teaching strategies to ensure that new generations successfully acquire new skills and learn new knowledge. Dr Brenton Fredericks,Head of the Communication Sciences Department at Central University of Technology in South Africa, recently developed a framework that could improve communication between educators and students in the classroom, promoting more constructive and effective learning.

**////Main text:**

Recent technological advances have led to the rapid spread of information on news websites, social media platforms, and other online sites. As a result, people can now easily access countless resources that focus on a wide range of different topics through their laptops, smartphones, and tablets.

This increased access to information opens new opportunities for internet users to educate themselves and learn more about topics of interest. Some studies also suggest that it is changing the way in which students approach education, making them less inclined to blindly accept what they are learning inside the classroom.

Questioning new information can be very valuable in learning, as it can promote critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem-solving skills. However, traditional teaching strategies are based on students passively listening to lessons without questioning the knowledge conveyed by their teachers.

Dr Brenton Fredericks, Head of the Communication Sciences Department at Central University of Technology, has been exploring how educators could better meet the educational needs of new generations of students. In one of his recent papers, co-authored by Gregory Alexander who specialises in the psychology of education, Dr Fredericks introduced a framework that could promote more constructive communication in South African classrooms.

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Past education research suggests that it has become exceedingly difficult to transfer knowledge to students, due to a decline in their listening skills, a lack of attention or interest, common distractions, differences in viewpoints, or other issues.

Dr Fredericks suggests that the discrepancy between the needs of learners and existing educational strategies could be bridged using alternative means of communication, as studies have highlighted a communication breakdown between learners and educators in contemporary classrooms.

The theoretical framework introduced by Dr Fredericks and Dr Alexander is based on the theory of social constructivism, which suggests that knowledge is composed through the interaction of learners with their social environment.

In this context, learners in the classroom can affect one another, and mutual understanding and healthy social interaction can promote their learning. The researchers suggest that this active learning process, based on constructing knowledge as a group through mutual exchanges, could be very valuable in classroom settings.

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According to the researchers, educators will need to rethink how they communicate with their students if they wish to effectively impart new skills and knowledge. Their framework outlines a series of communication-related factors that can influence academic performance and learning.

Firstly, it focuses on verbal communication, particularly emphasising the need to ensure that students are proficient in the language they are being taught in. In South Africa, most students attend lessons in English, even if it is not their mother tongue. Studies have found that learners who are fluent in the language in which they are being taught have a much better chance of doing well in school than students who are not.

The second type of communication emphasised by the team’s framework is non-verbal communication. Past studies suggest that unconscious body movements, such as facial expressions, gestures, physical proximity, and unconscious touching, can greatly influence learning.

According to a 2007 study by Raman and Sharma, the verbal aspect of communication only conveys approximately 35% of a message, while non-verbal gestures communicate the remaining 65%. The researchers’ framework thus suggests that educators should closely consider their gestures and non-verbal communication strategies, to ensure that they effectively convey messages to students.

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Dr Fredericks and Professor Alexander also point out the negative effects of verbal aggression, which is sometimes observed in South African classrooms, on learning. Aggressive communication has been found to hinder the students’ sense of self-worth, reducing their ability to acquire valuable knowledge, skills, and values.

To reduce verbal aggression in the classroom, educators and learners should both work on their listening skills, ensuring that they are respectful and open to the views of others.

In contrast, some students can also experience a ‘communication apprehension’, marked by anxiety and the fear of public embarrassment. This can discourage them from participating in class discussions, reducing their engagement in active learning activities. According to the researchers, educators should try to make learners who are self-conscious to feel more comfortable, encouraging them to participate in class discussions to improve their confidence.

Finally, Dr Fredericks and Professor Alexander highlight the importance of fostering good interpersonal relationships between teachers and learners, while also making classroom activities more engaging and interactive. Instead of merely lecturing students, they explain that students should be engaged in active discussions about what they are learning, within a safe and respectful classroom environment.

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As part of their study, the researchers conducted interviews with educators working at 20 primary and high schools in the Mangaung region of South Africa and asked them to complete questionnaires. The goal of this survey was to gather insight about how the educators experienced communication in their classrooms, focusing on the different factors outlined by the framework.

When they analysed the data, Dr Fredericks and Professor Alexander found that verbal communication, non-verbal communication, verbal aggression, communication apprehension, immediacy and teaching styles all influenced the transfer of knowledge from educators to students.

Overall, 91% of the survey respondents reported that verbal communication influenced their student’s academic achievement, while 63% felt that non-verbal communication did, and 89% believed that immediacy did.

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Interestingly, only 49% of educators believed that verbal aggression, such as belittling remarks made by teachers, influenced learning achievement, while the remaining 51% did not.

Similarly, 54% of respondents felt that communication apprehension strongly affected the learners’ performance, while the remaining 46% indicated that it had no or little effect. Based on these findings, the researchers suggest that educators should be made more aware of the negative consequences of verbal aggression and communication apprehension in the classroom.

The team’s study provides interesting insight about how educators in South Africa perceive communication in the classroom. In the future, their findings and framework could inform the development of effective teacher training programs aimed at improving communication between young generations of learners and their teachers.

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This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘A framework for improved classroom communication in the South African schooling context’, Helion, 2021.

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