



**COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE MAINSTREAM  
AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS IN A  
RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL, MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract:**

Communication in an organization such as the school is important, especially the social and working communication among teachers. When communication among the teachers is effective, there would be a collaboration between them in work, especially when implementing the school curricular and co-curricular programmes successfully. In schools where there are two educational streams; the mainstream and the Special Education Integration Programme, it is vital that effective communication is given priority. This study describes and discusses the characteristics of work and social communication between the Special Education teachers and the mainstream teachers of a local rural primary school in Selangor, Malaysia. Four teachers from each stream were selected as respondents for the study. The findings revealed that there appeared to be good teachers' communication from both streams. These teachers have collaborated in executing their tasks and they have developed a good rapport and effective communication in other fields of work as well such as co-curricular activities and other school activities such as the Parents Teacher Association meetings and Staff developments and sports. The findings through interviews with the teacher respondents

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and documents showed that the teachers have practiced their social intelligence, have used their interpersonal communication skills and have adopted a social network, 'WhatsApp' application in their communication in school. The school administrator has played its part too in establishing effective communication between superiors and subordinates.

**Keywords:** Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP), mainstream, effective communication, social intelligence, social network, collaboration

## 1. Introduction

This study highlights the characteristics of communication between the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) teachers and the mainstream teachers. Being under the same administrator and leadership, they share several responsibilities. For the SEIP teachers, other than their commitment to the special children; they are also responsible for implementing the school programmes. The mainstream teachers and the SEIP teachers have to work together in the school programmes. As administrator of the school, he has to play his part in establishing effective communication among the staff, especially when there are two streams of education involved. In doing so, the administrator has employed the "WhatsApp" application as a convenient tool of communication in the school. Despite individual sharing, there is also the benefit of group sharing such as the formation of 'Warga SKSL' group by the 'administrator' (a term used by the application) who is actually the headmaster of Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Leman (Sungai Leman Primary School).

The group participants are the school administrator, the senior assistants, the staff of teachers from both streams and the school workers. Since its formation and establishment, it has been an important and active channel of communication for the school. The superiors, like the heads of subject panels, societies and clubs in the group keep reminding the participants from both streams in the WhatsApp group to gradually check the updates which are posted on the application every day. Even tentative of programs and calling letters for meetings are being posted on the WhatsApp group channel before the physical document is passed on to the teacher concerned. Important updates, images and information for both streams such as messages and official reminders, and announcements about work are delivered in minutes.

## 2. Background of the Study

The two groups of teachers are designated in different nature and scopes of responsibility but under the same administrator. Teachers in regular or mainstream education face different challenges in achieving their goals as expected syllabus outcomes. The special education teacher serves both as an educator and as an advocate for students with special needs. Today, there are seven teachers teaching special children with an enrolment of 26

special children. They are the children with mild Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, minimal mental retardation, Down syndrome and Cerebral Palsy with learning disabilities. Unlike the SEIP the mainstream comprises 36 teachers with 317 normal students. The SEIP is under the same administration but with a Senior Assistant of Special Education who made up the fourth senior assistant for the school besides the other three, the senior assistants for the curriculum, the students' affairs and the co-curricular. However, working under the same administrator and school, they are expected to fulfill their obligations and responsibility to the school.

The majority of the teachers from both streams in this school are graduates and only a small number of teachers from the mainstream are Diploma holders. Their indifferences in academic background and achievements have formed a gap between the teachers of the '*graduates*' and the '*non-graduates*'. However, this has not seriously impaired the relationship or performance of the teachers as a whole because somehow, they find ways in maintaining their social and work communication through this application. 'Warga SKSL' has included all the teachers from both streams as the group participants and this media has played important role in maintaining and developing effective communication, especially between the mainstream and the special education stream.

This study examines the characteristics of communication among the teachers of two different education streams, the Special Education Integration Programme (SEIP) and the mainstream of a rural national primary school located in Selangor, Malaysia.

### **3. General Objective**

The aim of the study is to examine the characteristics of communication that contribute to the effectiveness of communication between the mainstream and the Special Education teachers of the rural national primary school in Selangor, Malaysia.

#### **3.1 Specific Objectives**

- To identify the different characteristics of communication skills that the teachers in both streams have in making effective communication.
- To examine the most preferred type of communication by the teachers of both streams.

### **4. Literature Review**

The literature discusses the types of interpersonal communication which play a role in effective communication, thus enabling collaboration among teachers. Another aspect of communication in an organization involves effective communication between the superiors and the subordinates. Such communication needs to be maintained so that there is good rapport and the development of positive attitudes among the superiors and the subordinates. In this study, the administration has adopted a social network called

the 'WhatsApp application' where the participants are grouped as 'Warga SKSL'. This application has helped in the official and social communication of the school staff during and after working hours. Another factor that helps improve communication and strengthens the cooperation among the teachers in the school is called 'Social Intelligence' which is the ability to talk and communicate with people effectively. However, effective communication starts from the leadership management in the organization. Good and effective leadership management will ensure the enhancement of integrity, understanding, collaboration and a healthy working environment. Hence, communication works well when there are cooperation and active participation among all parties.

#### 4.1 Communication

Communication is the 'lifeblood' of every school organization or workplace. It is a process that links the individual, the group and the organization. It is also regarded as the "essence of organizations" (Rutil & Gunasegaran, 2020). In other words, techniques of communication determine the structure, extensiveness and scope of the organizations. The most important type of communication is *interpersonal communication* or commonly described simply as *face-to-face* communication between two or more people. In the workplace, interpersonal skill is considered the lifeline of the organization. The success of activities carried out depends on effective communication. Hence, if there is a gap in interpersonal communication, the organization would not be efficient or might fail. There are seven most important interpersonal elements, namely:

- "Verbal communication;
- Non-verbal communication;
- Listening skills;
- Negotiation;
- Problem-solving;
- Decision-making;
- Assertiveness" (Datu Masjidi & Gunasegaran).

[Verbal Communication](#) - Effective verbal or spoken communication is dependent on a number of factors and cannot be fully isolated from other important interpersonal skills such as [non-verbal communication](#), [listening skills](#) and [clarification](#). Clarity of speech, remaining calm and focused, being polite and following some basic rules of etiquette will all aid the process of verbal communication.

[Non-Verbal Communication](#) - It is communicating without words using body language. Non-verbal communications include facial expressions, the tone and pitch of the voice, gestures displayed through body language (kinesics) and the physical distance between the communicators.

[Listening Skills](#) - How we interpret both the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others. Listening is the key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively, messages could easily be misunderstood.

Negotiation - Working with other people to find a mutually agreeable (Win/Win) outcome or situation. In other words, one has to tolerate and be considerate with others.

Problem Solving - It means working with others to identify, define and solve problems. People can benefit from having good problem-solving skills whether they are problems or even more severe or complex than others. It would be wonderful to have the ability to solve all problems. However, there is no one way in which all problems can be solved.

Decision Making - It means exploring and analyzing options to make sound decisions. In its simplest sense, decision-making is the act of choosing between two or more courses of action. When people find it hard to make decisions, they would find more information or get other people to offer their recommendations.

Assertiveness - It is communicating our values, ideas, beliefs, opinions, needs and wants freely. By being assertive we should always respect the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of other people. It also concerns a situation of one being able to express feelings, wishes, wants, desires and acts in their own best interests, to stand up for themselves without undue anxiety, to express honest feelings comfortably and to express personal rights without denying the rights of others.

#### **4.2 Leadership Communication**

In an organization like the school, communication is vital in maintaining a positive relationship between superiors and subordinates. According to Gunasegaran & Suridi (2021), competence in communicating and satisfactory leadership and management performance determine a positive relationship. This means that good supportive communication from a leader will enable the subordinate to perform well in work. Two-way communication between both leaders and subordinates is also a way of enhancing work performance. For example, in order to seek fresh ideas or information, leaders can expand their thinking through feedback from their subordinates. In other words, if a superior uses supportive communication, he will nurture his group members or his subordinates in bringing out their best. There will be intrinsic values and understanding, trust, and empowerment when there is a good communication platform built for both parties. In schools, verbal and non-verbal have been the most common nature of communication.

#### **4.3 Social Networking**

In addition, the use of social networking in communication among Malaysian and other countries in the world has become popular and demandable. A research conducted by Luthans, Hodgetts & Rosenkrantz (1988) on 178 managers, found that 44% of the managers' activities were devoted to routine communication made the biggest contribution to effectiveness, measured in terms of performance and satisfaction.

#### **4.4 Leadership and Management**

Khairul Faiz Alimi (2021), states that a leader must know how to lead as well as manage. For instance, managing involves universal skills such as planning, budgeting and controlling whereas leadership stresses more on having a vision of what the organization can become. Leadership too requires eliciting co-operation and teamwork from a large network of people by giving mandate, motivation and persuasion wherever and whenever possible. In other word, a leader has to have the most influence in performance and morale of the organization he is leading. There should also be understanding and cooperation between the leader and his subordinates. Therefore, leadership needs a supportive environment and relationship which starts with effective communication.

### **5. Research Methodology**

This case study examines the intrinsic interest in the case itself which is the effectiveness of communication between the teachers in the mainstream and the Special Education Integration Programme of the rural primary school in Selangor, Malaysia. Since there are only seven teachers in the SEIP, only four Special Education teachers are selected for the interviews. Another four teachers are from the mainstream. Eight respondents were selected to represent the whole population of the school. The study engages qualitative method research using two types of instruments; the interview and the observation.

#### **5.1 Interviews**

In this study, the standardized open-ended type of interview was used. All the interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order. Questions were worded in open-ended format (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010).

#### **5.2 WhatsApp Conversation Observation**

In this study, as the researcher is one of the teacher participants in the WhatsApp 'Warga SKSL' group in the school, the WhatsApp conversations were collected from the researcher's email which was sent through the researcher's WhatsApp application. The teachers' conversations of both streams as participants in the 'Warga SKSL' were observed.

### **6. Findings and Discussion**

The characteristics of communication that ensure the effectiveness of communication have been identified in this study. The two objectives of this study are interpreted and discussed accordingly below.

#### **6.1 Objective 1**

Identify the different characteristics of communication skills that the teachers in both streams have in making effective communication.

The interviews carried out with the teachers from both streams have identified several style and types of communication they used in their working environment and it was discovered that the interpersonal type of communication was the most common and effective tool of communication between the two streams of teachers. They claimed that they were very comfortable with face-to-face or verbal communication. It was obvious that these teachers saw each other at school every day and met at the cafeteria or the canteen for food. Another common place where they met each other was the assembly ground during the assembly every Monday and also some locations around the school such as the office and the field. Since the Special Education children share the same school field with the mainstream students, the teachers do meet at the field. So, there are many opportunities for them to have conversations.

The verbal communication skill is the interpersonal skill that can intervene with the rest of the other interpersonal type of communication such as Non-verbal communication, Listening skills, Negotiation, Problem-solving, Decision-making and Assertiveness will occur and follow automatically and accordingly at its own pace and convenience.

The use of the WhatsApp application in the school as a source of communication among all the teachers in the 'Warga SKSL' group has actually formed or built their relationships and friendship as colleagues. In the application, every teacher corresponds either actively or prefers to stay as a 'silent reader' unless they are requested to answer or take part in the chat. Since the participants comprise the whole staff of the school, the use of the internet or online chat is active. The teachers of both streams agreed that the choice of 'WhatsApp application' to communicate has proven to be efficient and useful as important information and updates about work are fast and accurate with images and photos.

In addition, they too realized that since they participated in the 'Warga SKSL' in the WhatsApp application, they have become more friendly and able to discuss, negotiate and make better decisions. Very often, birthdays are wished in the chat of 'Warga SKSL', posted with pictures of cakes with candles. This might seem childish but, in some way, the teacher might feel that people remember her birthday and it made her happy and appreciated. Before this application became the channel for communication, birthdays are personal and private. According to the teacher respondents, the 'Warga SKSL' WhatsApp group in the school is monitored by the headmaster of the school. This however provides an easy and more convenient two-way communication between the subordinates and the leader or superior from both streams.

Social intelligence is a kind of talent that only some people have in communication with others and they do not depend too much on tools such as the WhatsApp application. They are more comfortable with verbal communication as they have confidence in themselves and feel independent. This is usually seen among the few elder teachers aged 50 and above. They find ways and time to meet and chat during their lunch breaks at the cafeteria. They are not as keen on using mobile phones as the younger generation.

## 6.2 Objective 2

Examine the most preferred type of communication by the teachers of both streams. The information gathered from the interview showed the differences in the teachers' perception on preferred type of communication. Through their experiences, they could identify the type of communication they always used which they were comfortable with and they have found it more effective.

The four teachers of the mainstream have chosen the 'WhatsApp' application. They have agreed that sometimes they were busy with work and did not find time to see other colleagues, especially their superiors. They even started the lesson by first texting to report the pupils' attendance for that day to the office. They found that many things could be done within seconds using the application. They could get to know each other and made decisions and discussions through the 'WhatsApp' application. After all, there is free access to the internet around the school. Natural talents like interpersonal skills and social intelligence need 'face to face' interaction of both parties which sometimes is impossible and inconvenient due to time constraints and location.

The interpersonal type of communication with the seven elements have improved and helped them to communicate but this only happened during working hours. However, they still found time to spend together during school hours at breakfast in the cafeteria and places like the field, library, office and the staffroom.

The other four respondents from the SEIP have similar opinions and perceptions of the 'WhatsApp' application. They added that the superior or the headmaster of the school has created a very useful and efficient way of communication in the school administration.

Unlike the other characteristics of communication, WhatsApp is a trendy online application used for texting messages and sending images including videos, 24 hours a day. Its convenience helps to connect people who have problems in having face to face communication. For this reason, more teachers have followed the channel for the 'Warga SKSL'. Moreover, their classes are in the building situated at the further end of the school hence they could easily send and receive information fast, especially to and from the administration.

## 7. Conclusions and Implications

This case study has identified several characteristics of communication which include the people's interpersonal communication skills, social intelligence and the latest in the school, is the social network; the WhatsApp application. The teachers and workers in the school have become the participants in the 'Warga SKSL' group. As a leadership communication tool in Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Leman (SKSL) has shown, all teachers from the SEIP as well as the mainstream have access to communication. With the free internet access in the school, the staff is able to use the social network application in their process of communication. They are able to send messages, info and updates on official matters. The teachers' participation and involvement in this channel of



'WargaSKSL' show positive factors of attitude they contribute in making communication effective between the superiors and the subordinates.

Another important factor in the group relationship is support. The support from both parties, the superiors and the subordinates give to function well as an organization. There may be lots of wasted and meaningless responses in the conversations or chatting, but they seemed to settle down when certain issues are solved and messages are understood and successfully delivered or exchanged.

This situation has in fact developed social intelligence and improved interpersonal skill of communication, especially when they work together side by side in the school programmes such as Teachers Day and Sports Day.

Since the WhatsApp application became the school communication online channel, the participants of the school staff are friendlier towards one another. At times there are a number of silent readers in the Warga SKSL who stayed passive, but that doesn't mean they are not participating or communicating. They are either just not interested to join in or occupied with other more important matters. Also, there are discussions on decisions making, for example, the dates for the family gathering and when and where is the UPSR camp going to be held. More teachers are posting their suggestions which sometimes not happened in the meeting because of time constraints.

There is good rapport among the participants who are in the WhatsApp group of Warga SKSL. Their indifferences as workmates are not a gap in their relationship or friendship. Every teacher's birthday is being reminded by greetings with posts of images of birthday cakes. These positive factors; support and good rapport have contributed to the effectiveness of communication. Another important factor that has kept the group going, is the leader himself. The headmaster has shown that communication between the staff has to be effective, good and effective communication between teachers of both streams will ensure success in the school management and leadership. His understanding, tolerance and patience in following the Warga SKSL WhatsApp group made him a respectful person and leader. This kind of work and social communication using the WhatsApp application may cost, but the benefit that all the teachers of both streams get is priceless.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Authors**

**Gunasegaran Karuppannan** is an Associate Professor at Universiti Selangor (UNISEL) situated in Malaysia. Currently he holds the post as Deputy Dean in Centre for Graduate Studies office. He received his Bachelor Degree (Hons in Genetics) from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), then he continued his study at University Malaya to get his Masters degree in Educational Management. Finally, he received his PhD from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 2004 on Educational Administration focussing on Special Education. His major research interests are the area of Special Education. He is an

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