



THE DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN PEER GROUPS AT SDIT PLUS USMAN BIN ALI MEDAN

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the dynamics of interpersonal communication within peer groups and the meaning of communication experiences among elementary school students. The research problem emerged from preliminary observations and interviews indicating dominance in group discussions, unequal participation, and conflicts arising from verbal and nonverbal misunderstandings in the school environment. This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The participants consisted of nine respondents: four students, four parents, and one homeroom teacher at SDIT Plus Usman Bin Ali Medan. Data were collected through observations and in-depth interviews and analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, supported by triangulation to ensure credibility. The findings reveal that students' interpersonal communication manifests in cooperative, competitive, and conflictual patterns. Children interpret communication as experiences of acceptance or rejection, which influence their self-confidence and social relationships. The main themes identified include openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, and conflict management. The study implies that schools should strengthen communication and socio-emotional skill development programs to foster a supportive and psychologically safe interaction environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Elementary education constitutes a foundational period in a child's life, not only in terms of cognitive and academic achievement but also in the development of social, emotional, and interpersonal competencies that will influence future adjustment and well-being. During the elementary school years, children gradually expand their social interactions beyond the immediate family environment and begin to engage more intensively with teachers and peers in structured and unstructured school settings. The classroom, playground, and various collaborative learning activities provide daily opportunities for children to negotiate meaning, express thoughts and emotions, manage disagreements, and build mutual understanding. In this context, peer groups become a central social arena in which children practice and internalize patterns of interpersonal communication that shape their self-concept, confidence, and sense of belonging. Therefore, examining interpersonal communication within peer groups is essential for understanding children's broader social development.

Interpersonal communication, particularly in childhood, cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of verbal messages from one individual to another. Rather, it is a transactional and dynamic process that involves the exchange of meanings through verbal expressions, nonverbal cues, emotional reactions, and contextual interpretations. Through interpersonal communication, children learn to interpret facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, and implicit social rules that govern peer interactions. Communication also serves as a medium through which children receive feedback about themselves, including signals of acceptance, appreciation, criticism, or rejection. These communicative experiences significantly influence how children perceive their own competence and social value within a group. When communication runs effectively and empathetically, children are more likely to develop positive peer relationships and a healthy sense of self; conversely, repeated misunderstandings, exclusion, or negative labeling may contribute to social withdrawal, insecurity, and relational difficulties. From a developmental standpoint, children in elementary school, typically aged between six and twelve years, are situated within Erik Erikson's psychosocial stage of industry versus inferiority. At this stage, children are strongly motivated to demonstrate competence, gain recognition, and prove their abilities in academic and social domains. Peer interaction becomes particularly meaningful because classmates and friends serve as important sources of comparison and validation. Positive communication experiences, such as being listened to, supported, or trusted in group tasks, reinforce a sense of industry and capability. However, if children frequently encounter rejection, dominance by others, ridicule, or unresolved conflict, they may internalize feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. Thus, the quality of interpersonal communication within peer groups directly intersects with children's psychosocial development and emerging identity.

In addition to psychosocial theory, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective highlights that children's development occurs within interconnected environmental systems that continuously influence one another. The school environment and peer groups represent crucial components of the microsystem, where face-to-face interactions occur regularly and intensively. Within this microsystem, patterns of communication—such as openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, and conflict management—are learned and practiced. The mesosystem, which includes relationships between family and school, further shapes how children interpret and respond to peer interactions, while broader cultural values embedded in the macrosystem influence norms of politeness, cooperation, competition, and emotional expression. Consequently, interpersonal communication among elementary school children must be understood not only as individual behavior but also as a phenomenon embedded in layered social and cultural contexts.

Preliminary observations and interviews conducted at SDIT Plus Usman Bin Ali Medan revealed a complex picture of interpersonal communication dynamics among fifth-grade students. In classroom group discussions and collaborative assignments, certain students tended to dominate conversations and decision-making processes, while others remained passive, hesitant, or reluctant to voice their opinions. Instances of misunderstanding frequently emerged from differences in tone of voice, interpretation of facial expressions, or limited ability to articulate emotions clearly. Some students reported feeling comfortable and valued when their peers listened attentively and responded positively; however, others expressed feelings of being ignored, misunderstood, or excluded from group activities. These varied experiences suggest that interpersonal communication within peer groups is not uniform but characterized by cooperative, competitive, and conflictual patterns that carry significant emotional meaning for children.

Furthermore, interviews with parents and the homeroom teacher indicated that communication-related challenges often manifest in subtle but recurring forms, such as minor conflicts escalating due to misinterpretation, unequal participation in teamwork, or children withdrawing to avoid confrontation. Although character education and moral values are formally introduced in the school curriculum, their practical application within spontaneous peer interactions remains uneven. Children still require contextual guidance and structured opportunities to practice constructive communication skills, including expressing disagreement respectfully, offering support, and resolving conflicts collaboratively. These findings underscore the need to explore interpersonal communication not only from observable behaviors but also from the subjective meanings children attach to their experiences. Despite the recognized importance of interpersonal communication in shaping social adjustment and emotional well-being, research focusing on how elementary school children interpret and construct meaning from their peer communication experiences remains limited, particularly within Islamic integrated school settings. Most existing studies emphasize measurable aspects of communication skills rather than exploring lived experiences and internal perceptions. Therefore, a qualitative approach that prioritizes participants' voices and interpretations is necessary to gain a deeper and more holistic understanding of communication dynamics within peer groups.

This study aims to explore the dynamics of interpersonal communication within peer groups and to uncover how children interpret their communication experiences in the school environment. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the research seeks to capture the lived experiences of nine respondents, consisting of four students (male and female), four parents, and one homeroom teacher. Through systematic observation and in-depth interviews, the study endeavors to identify recurring themes such as openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, and conflict management, as well as to examine how these themes influence children's confidence and

social relationships. By providing a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis of interpersonal communication dynamics, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the fields of interpersonal communication and child social development, and practically to support educators in designing communication and socio-emotional development programs. Ultimately, fostering a supportive, equitable, and psychologically safe communication climate within peer groups is essential for promoting healthy social development and enabling children to thrive both academically and socially.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore and understand the lived experiences and subjective meanings of interpersonal communication among elementary school students within peer groups. The qualitative method was chosen because the focus is on capturing children's experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of communication, rather than measuring skills quantitatively. The phenomenological design was considered appropriate as it emphasizes understanding the essence of participants' experiences, including how communication is experienced as acceptance, rejection, cooperation, conflict, or support, and how these experiences influence children's self-confidence, social relationships, and emotional well-being.

The research was conducted at SDIT Plus Usman Bin Ali Medan, an Islamic integrated elementary school that combines academic learning with character education. Participants consisted of nine respondents selected purposively, including four fifth-grade students (male and female), four parents, and one homeroom teacher. Students were chosen to represent diverse communication patterns, including active, dominant, and passive styles, while parents provided insight into children's communication behavior and socio-emotional development at home. The homeroom teacher contributed perspectives on classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and communication challenges. Data were collected through non-participant observations and semi-structured in-depth interviews to capture authentic interactions, communication patterns, emotional responses, and experiences of conflict or cooperation.

Data analysis followed thematic procedures typical in phenomenological research, involving data reduction, categorization, and interpretation to identify recurring patterns and core themes. The analysis revealed key aspects of interpersonal communication, including openness, empathy, supportiveness, equality, cooperative and competitive behaviors, and conflict management. Triangulation was applied to enhance credibility by comparing perspectives from students, parents, and the teacher, as well as integrating observational and interview data. Ethical considerations were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful treatment of participants. This methodological approach provided a rich, comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal communication within peer groups and its implications for children's social and emotional development in school settings.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Dynamics of Interpersonal Communication in Peer Groups

Cooperative Communication as the Foundation of Positive Relationships

Cooperative communication emerged as a relatively stable form of interaction within learning groups. Classroom observations indicated that students generally provided one another with opportunities to speak and avoided excessive domination during discussions. When discussions took place, they tended to use simple and comprehensible language to prevent misunderstandings. Responses to peers' opinions were typically supportive or framed as clarifying questions rather than direct rejection. This situation created a more comfortable and open discussion atmosphere. Communication was not solely oriented toward task completion but also emphasized the collective process of working together. This pattern reflected a shared awareness among students to maintain harmony within group interactions. Students demonstrated the ability to adjust to the rhythm of group communication. These behaviors indicate that interpersonal communication had developed in a constructive and positive direction.

From the perspective of students' subjective experiences, cooperative communication was interpreted as a form of social acceptance that strengthened self-confidence. Students reported feeling valued when their opinions were considered rather than ignored. Such experiences shaped their perception that they made meaningful contributions to the group. Feeling appreciated increased their motivation to participate more actively in subsequent interactions. Their willingness to speak up grew when the communication environment was supportive. Parents observed noticeable changes in their children, who became more open and communicative at home. This finding suggests that positive communication experiences at school were transferred to the family environment. Therefore, cooperative communication played a significant role in forming a healthy self-concept among students. From the standpoint of interpersonal communication theory, this pattern reflects openness, empathy, and equality in interaction. Each group member had relatively equal opportunities to participate. There

was no significant psychological pressure when expressing opinions. Such a communication climate enabled students to develop emotional security. Emotional security is a fundamental prerequisite for social development at the elementary school level. When children feel safe, they are more willing to explore ideas and learn from mistakes. Consequently, cooperative communication not only supports academic achievement but also fosters emotional growth.

The homeroom teacher emphasized that successful cooperative communication does not occur spontaneously but is influenced by structured classroom management. Discussion rules, role distribution, and the habitual practice of mutual respect were identified as key supporting factors. The teacher consistently reminded students to listen carefully before responding. These interventions helped maintain balanced participation within groups. Thus, cooperative communication dynamics resulted from the interaction between students' individual characteristics and the instructional system implemented in the classroom.

Competitive Communication and the Dynamics of Dominance

In addition to cooperative communication, competitive dynamics also appeared within group interactions. Some students tended to speak more frequently and make decisions quickly without engaging in thorough discussion. This dominance occasionally caused other group members to become less active. More reserved students often chose to remain silent due to a lack of self-confidence. This imbalance in participation was not always consciously recognized by group members. However, over time, such patterns could influence the self-concept of less dominant students. They began to question their abilities when rarely given opportunities to contribute. This situation indicates that competitive communication may create informal hierarchies within peer groups.

During interviews, students who perceived themselves as less dominant expressed feelings of hesitation and fear of making mistakes. They worried that their opinions might not be accepted or might be considered irrelevant. These experiences led to a tendency to withdraw from active participation. Parents also observed changes in their children's moods after experiencing unbalanced interactions at school. Children appeared quieter and less enthusiastic about discussing classroom activities. This phenomenon demonstrates that communication dynamics have tangible emotional consequences. Therefore, fair communication management becomes an essential necessity. The homeroom teacher explained that differences in personality and academic ability often triggered dominance within groups. Students with stronger academic performance frequently felt responsible for leading discussions. However, without proper regulation, leadership could easily shift into dominance. To address this issue, the teacher implemented rotating role assignments. This strategy helped create more balanced participation among students. Thus, competitive communication requires careful regulation to prevent relational inequality within peer groups.

Conflictual Communication as a Space for Emotional Learning

Conflict is an inseparable component of interpersonal communication dynamics. Observations revealed that conflicts frequently arose from differences of opinion or misunderstandings in interpreting instructions. A tone of voice perceived as harsh or jokes that were misinterpreted could trigger tension. In the early stages, conflict was typically marked by emotional expressions such as anger or disappointment. However, conflicts rarely persisted for long due to teacher intervention. Mediation processes helped students clarify intentions and repair communication. After clarification, peer relationships generally returned to normal. This indicates that conflicts were temporary and manageable. Students reported that conflicts allowed them to understand their peers' perspectives more deeply. They realized that each individual possesses different ways of thinking. This awareness broadened their social perspective. Through conflict, students learned that differences are not threats but natural components of group dynamics. These experiences strengthened their capacity for empathy. They became more cautious and thoughtful in expressing their opinions. Therefore, conflict served as a meaningful medium for social learning. Parents observed that conflict experiences enhanced their children's emotional regulation. Children learned to apologize and forgive. These skills proved beneficial not only at school but also in daily life. The process demonstrates that interpersonal communication contributes significantly to the development of emotional regulation. Conflicts resolved through dialogue increased students' social maturity. They no longer avoided differences but attempted to understand and resolve them constructively.

From a developmental perspective, conflict experiences are closely related to the formation of problem-solving skills. Children learn to negotiate personal interests with collective goals. These skills serve as essential social capital for broader social contexts. Without experiencing conflict, children might struggle to manage differences in the future. Therefore, conflict should not be viewed as an obstacle but as a developmental process. Overall, conflictual communication highlights the complexity and richness of peer group dynamics. When managed constructively, conflict can strengthen interpersonal relationships. A supportive school environment becomes a determining factor in successful conflict resolution.

The Meaning of Interpersonal Communication Experiences for Students Experiences of Acceptance and Neglect as Psychological Determinants

The first meaning derived from interpersonal communication experiences within peer groups concerns feelings of acceptance or neglect, which significantly influence students' psychological conditions. Interview findings revealed that when students were given opportunities to speak, listened to attentively, and responded to positively, they felt valued and considered important members of the group. These feelings extended beyond momentary emotional reactions and shaped an internal belief that they possessed meaningful value and contribution. Such experiences encouraged students to express their opinions more confidently in subsequent discussions. They no longer feared making mistakes excessively because they perceived the environment as socially safe. A sense of acceptance also strengthened their emotional attachment to peer groups. Students began to view the group as a comfortable space for self-expression. Thus, interpersonal communication functioned as a concrete form of social validation in children's psychological development.

Conversely, experiences of being ignored or denied speaking opportunities were interpreted as negative and emotionally impactful. Some students reported feeling disappointed when their opinions were interrupted or left unacknowledged. These experiences generated self-doubt regarding their abilities. Repeated negative experiences could gradually form passive communication patterns. Children became more cautious and tended to withdraw in group situations. Parents observed noticeable mood changes after such experiences. Children appeared quieter and less enthusiastic about discussing school activities. This finding indicates that communication experiences extend beyond the classroom and affect family interactions. Within the framework of psychosocial development theory, experiences of acceptance or neglect are closely linked to the development of competence. At the elementary school stage, social recognition strongly influences self-confidence formation. Positive communication experiences are internalized as evidence of personal capability. In contrast, negative experiences may foster feelings of inferiority. Therefore, the quality of peer communication has long-term implications for students' psychological well-being. A supportive communication environment becomes a fundamental developmental necessity. Overall, experiences of acceptance and neglect demonstrate that interpersonal communication is not merely an exchange of information but a process of constructing self-meaning. Children evaluate themselves based on responses received from peers. Communication thus functions as a social mirror shaping self-perception and emotional balance.

The Formation of Self-Confidence and Social Identity

The second identified meaning concerns the role of interpersonal communication in shaping self-confidence and social identity. Through daily interactions, students gradually construct an image of themselves based on social responses. When their ideas are accepted and appreciated, they develop confidence in their ability to think and contribute positively. These experiences reinforce a self-concept as competent individuals. Self-confidence does not emerge instantly but develops through repeated and consistent communication experiences. The more frequently students encounter positive interactions, the stronger their social identity becomes. They begin to position themselves as active members within peer groups. This development encourages them to take initiative in various classroom activities.

In contrast, unbalanced communication experiences may disrupt social identity formation. Students who are rarely given opportunities to speak may question their position within the group. They may perceive themselves as less significant members. Such perceptions can diminish motivation to participate in collective activities. The homeroom teacher observed that confident students adapt more easily to new situations and actively engage in teamwork. Parents also noted positive changes in family interactions when children felt appreciated at school. This indicates that social identity formed in school extends across different contexts.

From an ecological developmental perspective, peer groups constitute a microsystem that directly influences identity formation. Daily interactions create repeated social experiences that become material for internal reflection. These experiences shape children's self-concepts. Consequently, interpersonal communication serves as a crucial factor in the development of social identity during middle childhood.

Communication as a Medium for Social and Emotional Learning

The third identified meaning is that interpersonal communication within peer groups functions as a practical medium for social and emotional learning. Through everyday interactions, students learn how to express opinions in ways that are acceptable to others. They also learn to listen without immediate rejection. This process fosters empathy and perspective-taking abilities. In conflict situations, students practice emotional control before responding. They gradually understand that message delivery influences peers' reactions. These experiences progressively enrich their communication skills. Unconsciously, students are practicing social competencies that will benefit them in the long term.

Parents reported that after engaging in frequent group discussions at school, children became better at expressing feelings verbally. They no longer reacted impulsively when disagreeing. Teachers observed improvements in students' ability to resolve differences dialogically. Social-emotional learning did not occur solely through formal instruction but through everyday communication practice. Peer group interaction became a social laboratory where children experimented with various communication strategies. Mistakes served as shared learning opportunities. Thus, interpersonal communication functioned as a natural process of character education. In the context of long-term development, interpersonal communication experiences help children build emotional resilience. They learn that differences of opinion do not inevitably lead to division. They also understand the importance of maintaining relationships despite conflict. Values such as tolerance, patience, and social responsibility grow through communicative practice. Therefore, communication dynamics within peer groups contribute significantly to students' social and emotional maturity.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the dynamics of interpersonal communication within peer groups at the elementary school level demonstrate a complex and multidimensional pattern, encompassing cooperative, competitive, and conflictual interactions. These communication patterns do not function independently; rather, they interact continuously and shape students' social experiences in both academic and informal contexts. Cooperative communication serves as the primary foundation for creating a supportive, equitable, and psychologically safe interaction climate, thereby enhancing students' active participation and self-confidence. In contrast, competitive communication and dominance may lead to unequal participation and influence students' self-perceptions, particularly among those who tend to be less assertive. Meanwhile, conflictual communication, although initially associated with emotional tension, ultimately functions as a meaningful space for social-emotional learning when managed constructively and dialogically.

Furthermore, students interpret their interpersonal communication experiences as emotionally significant events closely related to feelings of acceptance, appreciation, or neglect within their peer groups. Experiences of acceptance strengthen self-confidence and contribute to the formation of a positive social identity, whereas experiences of exclusion may generate self-doubt and reduced participation. Peer group interaction thus becomes a central arena for the development of self-concept and self-esteem during middle childhood. In addition, interpersonal communication functions as a practical medium for social and emotional learning, enabling students to cultivate empathy, emotional regulation skills, and conflict resolution abilities. Therefore, the quality of interpersonal communication within peer groups has direct implications for students' overall psychosocial development. In conclusion, this study affirms that interpersonal communication is not merely an exchange of messages, but a formative process through which children construct meaning about themselves, their relationships, and their social roles. Consequently, fostering a supportive, inclusive, and equitable communication climate in schools is essential to promote students' optimal social and emotional development.

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