

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article examines assertive communication as a key component in the formation of social and citizenship competences in the context of higher education. Assertiveness is presented both as an individual skill and as a pedagogical tool that supports the development of autonomy, confidence, and constructive interaction. The study was conducted with 43 students in the educational and qualification degree "Master" in the specialty "Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy" at the Burgas State University "Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov". As part of the training, the students participated in training in assertive behavior, including role-playing real-life situations - friendly relationships, teamwork and communication between parents and teachers. The analysis of the cases shows that assertiveness allows for a clear statement of personal boundaries, respectful expression of needs and maintaining positive relationships without conflicts. The results emphasize that assertive communication builds trust, cooperation, and balance between personal and professional commitments. In conclusion, assertiveness is being established as a universal strategy for forming active citizens, capable of participating constructively in public and professional life, while contributing to the sustainable development of the community.

Keywords: social and citizenship competences, assertive communication, higher education.

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Introduction

The capacity to communicate assertively has become a decisive factor in navigating the complexities of contemporary social and educational environments. In higher education, where future professionals are shaped not only through disciplinary knowledge but also through the cultivation of civic responsibility and interpersonal competence, assertiveness emerges as a foundational skill. It enables individuals to articulate their perspectives with clarity, to negotiate differences without hostility, and to sustain relationships grounded in respect and reciprocity. From a pedagogical standpoint, assertiveness is not merely a personal trait but a structured communicative practice that contributes to the broader formation of social and citizenship competences. These competences, increasingly emphasized in European and global educational frameworks, require learners to balance autonomy with cooperation, and self-expression with sensitivity to diversity. Assertive communication provides precisely this balance: it empowers students to defend their positions while simultaneously acknowledging the legitimacy of others' viewpoints, thereby fostering constructive dialogue and mutual trust. In the context of higher education, the deliberate integration of assertiveness training responds to pressing societal needs. Universities are expected to prepare graduates who can participate responsibly in civic life, manage professional challenges with resilience, and contribute to sustainable community development. Assertive interaction supports these aims by equipping learners with strategies to handle conflict, to resist passive or aggressive extremes, and to engage in collaborative problem-solving. Moreover, it strengthens the ethical dimension of communication, as it is predicated on honesty, fairness, and

recognition of human dignity. Thus, the exploration of assertive communication within academic programs is not a peripheral exercise but a central component of competence-based education. It situates the learner at the intersection of personal growth and social responsibility, affirming that the ability to speak with confidence and respect is indispensable for both professional success and active citizenship.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to present assertive communication as an element of the formation of social and citizenship competences in the context of lifelong learning.

- The tasks to be solved in it are:
- To reveal the theoretical aspects of assertive communication
- to present ideas to students on the application of assertive communication in real life situations
- to analyze the results obtained.

The present study involved 43 students in the Master's degree program in Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy, studying at Burgas State University "Prof. Dr. Assen Zlatarov", Republic of Bulgaria.

Discussion

The formation of social and citizenship competences as part of the key competences for lifelong learning is set out in the Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong. In it, social competence is defined in unity with personal competence

and competence for acquiring learning skills, as the three together describe the ability of a person to manage himself, to work constructively with others and to sustainably develop his own learning and career. It also represents the ability to effectively and constructively interact with others, based on empathy, tolerance and respect for diversity. Social competence is manifested through a positive attitude towards cooperation and integrity, a willingness to overcome prejudices and build trust, as well as through resilience in dealing with stress and uncertainty. On the other hand, citizenship competences are defined as "the ability to act as responsible citizens and to fully participate in civic and social life, based on understanding of social, economic, legal and political concepts and structures, as well as global developments and sustainability [1].

As elements of social competence, B. Dimova lists a number of social skills such as: "the child's ability to successfully interact and cooperate with peers and adults, forming a socially responsible attitude towards others, autonomy and independence as a combination of self-control, self-learning and self-service, critical thinking and the ability to identify social problems and solve them in a way that is equally satisfactory to both parties" [2]. A key component of socio-civic competences, according to the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, is assertiveness, defined in the IN4SOC project as the ability to clearly and confidently express one's own views, goals and interests in a constructive way, combined with the ability to take into account the positions and situations of others. It not only strengthens personal autonomy and self-confidence, but also creates the basis for effective communication, mutual respect and active participation in public life [3].

This article focuses specifically on assertiveness as an element of social and citizenship competences.

V. Kapponi and T. Novak define the structure of assertiveness as a complex skill, including the following interrelated elements:

- Personal responsibility for one's own behavior
- demonstration of self-respect and respect for other people
- effective communication
- demonstration of confidence and a positive attitude
- ability to listen carefully and understand
- negotiation and reaching a work compromise
- searching for simplified solutions to complex situations [4].

N. Razhina and G. Babushkin present in their research an approach in which communicative competence is formed on the basis of the assertive behavior model. They describe assertive behavior as an interactional style grounded in self-confidence, readiness for cooperation and the ability to seek compromise as a leading strategy. Confidence in this perspective is viewed as an internal attitude, a personal stance toward oneself, others and the particular situation. Since this attitude is dynamic and subject to development, it becomes especially receptive to pedagogical influence [5]. Building on this broader understanding of assertiveness as a learnable and modifiable disposition, the formulation offered by M. Pipas and M. Jaradat adds an important communicative dimension. The authors define assertiveness as the ability to express one's feelings and rights while respecting the feelings and rights of others, a capacity that reduces conflict and

strengthens relationships through open and honest communication [6].

L. Pochebut defines assertiveness by comparing it with tolerance. In her view, assertiveness is a socio-psychological competence expressed in an individual's ability to defend their rights, interests and values, to pursue personal goals without humiliating others, and to maintain respect in interpersonal interaction. Unlike tolerance, which rests on mutual trust and recognition, assertiveness develops under more challenging conditions, especially when trust has been disrupted and active protection of personal positions is required [7]. Building on this understanding, A. Anyamene and G. Nwosu examine the effectiveness of assertiveness training as an opportunity to improve low self-esteem in adolescents. They emphasise that assertiveness is closely connected with self-confidence, self-esteem and anxiety, and that training in this area offers meaningful protection against factors that threaten the health and well-being of school students [8]. A similar thesis is supported by A. Eslami, L. Rabiei, S. M. Afzali, S. Hamidzadeh and R. Masoudi, according to whom assertiveness training improves levels of stress, anxiety and depression, as well as achieving the goal of helping people change their self-image, express themselves easily, express their thoughts and ideas in an appropriate way and therefore increase their self-esteem [9]. The negative effects of low assertiveness are described by D. Ames, A. Lee and A. Wazlawek as a manifestation of timidity and a tendency to make insufficiently ambitious proposals or excessive concessions, leading to limited personal development and weakening social interaction [10].

Results

The present study was conducted with 43 students of the Master's degree after completing the lecture course of the discipline they studied – *Development of Linguistic, Social and Cultural Competences in Kindergarten and Primary School*. As part of their training in developing social competences, a training course "Assertive Behavior" was held, in which the students practiced their skills in conducting assertive communication in everyday life situations. As part of the training, the students developed and acted out situations in which assertive communication proved to be key to dealing with challenges in professional and personal life. We present some of them, which we conditionally divided by type:

- interpersonal relationships (between peers in kindergarten/school) – 22 cases
- at the workplace (conflict between colleagues) – 15 cases
- parent-teacher conflict – 6 cases.

Case study: Friendship and setting personal boundaries

Situation: Ivan and Petar are best friends, they spend time together every day. For two weeks, Ivan buys Peter juice and candy because he doesn't have enough pocket money. Ivan starts to feel uncomfortable because he wants to save money for a gift for his mother's birthday.

Assertive response:

- Ivan decides to share his concerns with Peter.
- He explains that he can no longer buy treats because he needs money for a gift.
- He expresses respect for the friendship and offers an open conversation instead of silent dissatisfaction.

Result:

- Peter accepts the situation with understanding.
- The next day, he brings Ivan's mother a handmade birthday card.
- The friendship is maintained and strengthened through mutual support and sharing.

Case study: Refusing an additional task in teamwork

Situation: A colleague repeatedly transfers his tasks at the last minute. This leads to additional workload for the other team members.

Assertive reaction:

- Recognizing the colleague's workload: "I understand that you are very busy..."
- Clear statement of boundaries: "...but I cannot take on double work..."
- Argument: availability of own professional and personal commitments.
- Proposal for alternative support: discussion together, help in difficult moments.
- Emphasizing readiness for future help upon timely notification.
- Expression of gratitude for the trust.

Result:

- The refusal is made constructively, without accusations.
- Good relations in the team are maintained.
- Clear boundaries for the workload are set.

Case study: Parental dissatisfaction and assertive reaction of a teacher

Situation: A parent expresses dissatisfaction with the teaching methods in the primary school. He believes that the approach is not effective enough for his child. The teacher feels tension and the risk of conflict.

Assertive response:

- The teacher recognizes the parent's right to have an opinion: "I understand that you have concerns about the methods..."
- Calmly explains the goals and benefits of the methodology used.
- Emphasizes that the goal is the child's development, not opposition.
- Offers a specific example from practice to illustrate the effect.
- Invites the parent to a joint meeting to discuss progress.

Result:

- The parent feels listened to and respected.
- Trust and partnership are built between teacher and parent.
- Conflict is avoided, and communication becomes more open.
- The child receives support from both sides – school and family.

Conclusion

The analysis of the reviewed cases shows that assertive communication is a universal tool for maintaining good relationships in different social contexts. In **the workplace**, it allows for the setting of clear boundaries and prevents overload, while maintaining trust and cooperation through respectful refusal and the offer of alternative help. In **friendly relationships**, the open sharing of concerns and needs leads to mutual understanding and support, and the setting of boundaries strengthens the relationship and makes it healthier and more sincere. In **communication between parents and teachers**, assertiveness turns a potential conflict into a partnership - the recognition of the parent's point of view, combined with a reasoned position, builds trust and creates conditions for joint care for the child. In conclusion, assertiveness is not just a technique for refusing or defending personal positions, but a means of building sustainable relationships based on respect, trust and a balance between personal and professional commitments. By clearly stating boundaries, offering alternative forms of help and open communication, a culture of mutual respect is created that strengthens both professional and personal relationships.

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